

Text: 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Title: A Disciplined Servant

Truth: Paul commends a disciplined and servant mindset to every believer.

Date/Location: Sunday September 20, 2020 at FBC

Introduction

The teaching often emphasized in this passage would be reflected in the catchy title “all things to all men.” But we can dig a little deeper into Paul’s mindset to learn about his ministry philosophy.

I. Servant for the Sake of the Gospel, v. 19-23

A. Though free, Paul made himself a servant to all.

1. The idea of the word **free** is that he had a right to support. He was a “freeman” and should be paid for his labor, like the examples that he listed in 9:7-10, and 13. But he did not use that right. Consequently, he had something to “boast” in or rejoice over, because he was carrying out his God-given responsibility in an extraordinary way. This was its own reward, and we believe that approach resulted in heavenly reward for the apostle, far more than just unwillingly carrying out his divinely assigned responsibility.
2. The nuance of **servant** is that he is laboring underneath others and without pay. He is not an employee; he does not lord it over his audience. Rather, he gives himself freely to serve them, using his freedom to serve. He treated himself as no longer a freeman, but as a bondservant. This would be particularly unusual in the mind of his audience. To them, the slave-free distinction was as natural as male-female or young-old. It was just how things were in society. The upper crust of society would not be favorable to becoming a slave. Freedom was cherished. But slavery was a reality. In fact, sometimes people would arrange for themselves to go into slavery for a time because it could provide them some economic advantage (training, pay off debt, etc.) But Paul did not see himself as a slave to benefit himself. He did it to benefit *others!*

3. Paul set aside the reality that he was free, and instead embraced a servant-to-all mentality. He was following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who, though having all rights as the divine Son, gave them all up to give Himself as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28; John 13:15; Luke 22:27; Phil. 2:7) and His command (Mark 9:35). That example and command is not limited in its power to just the apostles, however. It extends to us today.
- B. Why? To win more people (2 Cor. 8:9) To win = to save. Living as he did removed possible causes of offense or stumbling blocks to his message. If the offense was financial, he did not take money for support. If the offense was dietary, he did not eat meat (1 Cor. 8:13). If it had to do with attire or language, he adjusted accordingly.
- C. For yourself, note these two things: the **way** Paul saw himself and the **reason** why he saw himself that way. He was what he was, but he put aside the **way** he saw himself so that he could serve people in a better way. He felt no selfish need to hang on to his particular ethnic or cultural identity to accomplish the much more important goal of proclaiming the gospel. Do you do that? Furthermore, the **reason** he did this was to bring people to salvation. Are our actions and aims like that?
- D. Verses 20-22 are a catalog of ways that Paul varied his approach and lifestyle to win more people to salvation. He intentionally used an adaptive strategy, not a rigid stick-to-a-single-culture model. A slave would be expected to adapt to whatever household he was sold into. Paul thought cross-culturally like that in his ministry because he saw himself as outside of all these categories, as if from another world.
1. To the Jews he became as a Jew, that he might win...Paul was already a Jew, but Christian salvation had extricated him from the requirement to practice the Jewish faith. He could still offer some sacrifices and keep his promises (Acts 18:18 and 21:26). He could maintain a kosher diet to avoid offending other Jews. He arranged the circumcision of Timothy (Acts 16:3). He could celebrate the cultural forms of Rosh Hashanah, for example (this weekend). But his underlying motivation was entirely separate

from what it was before. He used to think he had to keep these forms to be right with God. Now he knows that is not the case. He only keeps them to avoid offense.

2. To those who are under the law he became as one under the law, that he might win...
 3. To those who are without law, he became as without law, that he might win...He is not under its jurisdiction, but he has another law code to be concerned about, and that is Christ's law.
 4. To the weak he became as weak, that he might win...
 5. To all men, he become what was needed, that he might save...Paul knows he cannot save *all*, but his work can result in saving of *some*.
- E. In the circumstances in which Paul found himself he never compromised the gospel particularly, or the truth generally. He was not a malleable shapeshifter who pandered to the groups he was with at the time. He was not manipulative. What he was doing was to adopt appropriate and effective social and cultural practices that would allow him to have an entree into the lives of the folks in that culture. Maybe he dressed appropriately for that culture or had a diet that would not offend or be unnecessarily distracting. Perhaps this showed how he was just a regular person, not a high-society type.
- F. Why all this? The section ends with a purpose statement, once again emphasizing that he did all this for the gospel's sake. Christ and His gospel *literally drove* what Paul did. I would have to say, from this text, that it is imperative for every Christian to live this way. You will not find comfort here for an excuse to live a life that is not entirely directed by the gospel. We need to take a page out of Paul's playbook. Paul saw himself not as an employee of the gospel, but a partner, a co-investor.

II. Self-Control Required to Avoid Disqualification, v. 24-27

- A. It takes quite a concerted effort to live a life like this. It is a life that is hard because you give up your rights and liberties. It is a life that difficult because you limit yourself to please those around you. It

takes careful observation and thoughtfulness. Paul likens it to a regimen of training and competing in a foot race.

- B. Live to win the first-place prize. Run with direction and purpose and energy. Live with an attitude to win, not an attitude to lose. Now, of course, “to win” in the athletic illustration is a metaphor for living a self-controlled life that is worthy of the end goal of the crown of life.
- C. Exercise self-control in all things. Athletic practice is not for the faint of heart. Athletes practice and sacrifice and go through pain to win a crown that will perish. In the Christian life, the prize is imperishable. It is the crown of life, which is everlasting life itself.
- D. Paul says that he runs the Christian race with certainty. He fights by landing his blows, not just waving his arms around. He knows what he is doing—what he is aiming for. Notice how targeted Paul is:
- preach the gospel, 9:16, 18
 - lest we hinder the gospel of Christ, 9:12
 - that I might win the more, 9:19
 - that I might win Jews, 9:20
 - that I might win those who are under the law, 9:20
 - that I might win those who are without law, 9:21
 - that I might win the weak, 9:22
 - that I might by all means save some, 9:22
 - for the gospel’s sake, 9:23

In our entire life, we need to be this way as well. (By the way, I was going to write, “in our Christian life...” But the reality is that “our Christian life” == “our life” because we only have one life, and if we are Christians, then that *is* our life! There is no separate department of our life that is Christian and another part that is not Christian.) The point is that we need to be directed/driven/guided by Biblical priorities. We need to ask ourselves what we are doing, why we are doing what are doing, whether we should be motivated differently, and if we should be doing different things with the precious resources God has given us (time among them).

- E. He disciplines himself and brings it into subjection. You are the master of your body—your instrument of righteousness. Think

about it—you either decide to master your physical body, or it will turn to flab and you will grow overweight and the like. But if you control what you eat and drink and how you spend your time—not sitting around all the time—then you will be in better physical shape. It is the same in the spiritual realm. Your sinful self can rule the roost and keep you spiritually flabby, or Christ through His Spirit can guide YOU to rule the roost so that you live for Him. You discipline yourself; you bring yourself into subjection.

- F. The reason this is so important is that you can live for Christ for a while, or seem to, but then fall into disaster. There are two common ways of understanding the word “disqualified.”
1. Disqualified means loss of salvation. Being “thrown out of the race” indicates that Paul thought of the possibility of losing out on salvation entirely. We know that cannot be true from the text of Scripture. Still, I would say that Paul has a healthy concern that he and his audience examine themselves to make sure they are in the faith.
 2. Disqualified means loss of (potential) reward. Being “thrown out of the race” means that you are not able to continue to serve in some capacities, and that you do not even qualify for the winning prize, or any prize. There are sins that disqualify you from ministry or certain ministries. Paul takes pains to flee from those things that could cause him to fall into such disqualifying sin. How damaging that would be.

Regardless of which view you take, the idea of being disqualified is a strong warning that is meant to keep us prone-to-break-the-rules types in line. Perseverance and faithful service are responsibilities laid upon us, and the warnings attached to these ideas help us stay in line.

Conclusion

The Bible urges us to live an intentional, self-disciplined life of gospel service to others. If someone asks you, “Why are you doing that?” and you cannot answer with a good reason, then you need to start from the beginning and figure out what you are doing. If the reasons do not have anything to do with the honoring God and His

gospel, then re-think. If you do not see yourself as a servant, check your motivations.

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