

# All Things to All People

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*1 Cor 9:19-23*

## I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. The story has been told of a missionary to China who was in language school.
1. The very first day of class the teacher entered the room and, without saying a word, walked down every row of students. Finally, still without saying a word, she walked out of the room again. Then she came back and addressed the class.
  2. "Did you notice anything special about me?" she asked.
    - a. Nobody could think of anything in particular. One student finally raised her hand. "I noticed that you had on a very lovely perfume," she said.
    - b. The class chuckled.
    - c. But the teacher said, "That was exactly the point. You see, it will be a long time before any of you will be able to speak Chinese well enough to share the gospel with anyone in China. But even before you are able to do that, you can minister the sweet fragrance of Christ to these people by the quality of your lives. It is your lifestyle, lived out among the Chinese people, that will minister Christ to them long before you are able to say one word to them about personal faith in Jesus."
- B. Is it not very true that we demonstrate Jesus by the way that we live?
1. Often when we talk about ways to be active in evangelism, the first idea on everyone's mind is that we need to set a proper example.
    - a. I fear that many of my brethren mention the importance of a good example almost as a "cop out."
    - b. The thinking, I'm afraid, is often this: As long as I set a good example, that's as much responsibility I have for sharing the gospel of Jesus.
  2. That's not the case, but we need to couple our good example with the live-saving message of Jesus.
    - a. Think of the example of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16—
      - Paul and Silas, while imprisoned, weren't cursing the jailer nor the magistrates who ordered them beaten and thrown into prison—but they were singing hymns to God.
      - When the earthquake occurred and the jailer was about to take his own life, Paul pleaded with him to do himself no harm.
      - The jailer then went and fell before Paul and Silas and asked what he had to do to be saved, and Paul and Silas taught him and his family.
    - b. Had it not been for the example of Paul and Silas the jailer would never have cast himself at their feet. But, had it not been for the words Paul and Silas spoke, the jailer would never have been saved.
- C. This morning's text, in many ways, is about "lifestyle evangelism." Paul writes about the way that he lives in order that he might win people to Jesus.
1. It seems to me that we have been notorious for taking this passage out of its context.
    - a. We often talk about becoming all things to all people without thinking about the context in which Paul wrote these words.
    - b. We have too long, I think, seen these words as applying in a special way to missionaries.
      - We've thought that when a missionary goes to Africa or Eastern Europe, he or she ought to make his life as much like the natives as possible.
      - Let me give you a personal example:
        - I spent a couple weeks in Albania in Eastern Europe several years ago.
        - I was conscious to leave many of my American ideas here at home and to live according to Albanian culture as much as I could.

- One of the things which is much different in that culture is that guys walk down the street holding hands with their closest guy friends. It's a sign of friendship rather than romantic love in that culture.
  - A group of guys about my age wanted to take me out and show me their capital city, and I obliged.
    - One of the guys I was with reached over for my hand, and it would have been a major insult in his culture not to have held hands with him.
    - So, I was walking down the streets of Tirana, Albania, the largest city in that country holding hands with a couple guys.
      - We've often thought of this text in that way and ignored applications in our own culture. This morning, we want to think about applications in twenty-first century America.
2. While this text is about evangelism—a point we've already made and one we'll make throughout this text—evangelism is honestly a peripheral issue.
- a. The real issue in this text is the proper use of rights.
  - b. As we saw back in chapter 8, the strong in Corinth were abusing their rights regarding eating food in pagan temples.
    - There was absolutely nothing inherently wrong with their going to a pagan temple and eating food which had been sacrificed to idols. In fact, Paul would later tell Timothy: "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tm 4:4-5).
    - What was wrong was that the strong were going and eating in the pagan temples even though that act was leading some of their weak brethren to sin.
  - c. So throughout this chapter, Paul uses himself as an example to the strong about how to give up their rights.
    - Paul has already demonstrated to the Corinthians that he gave up the right to be a paid preacher and to take a long a believing wife on his missionary endeavors.
    - In this text, Paul writes of voluntarily giving up rights in order to win people who are not Christians.
    - As he does so, we see how Paul became "All Things to All People." He did so by being A SERVANT, A SLACKER, & A SHARER.

## II. A SERVANT, v. 19.

- A. "Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them."
- B. Paul was free from all.
  - 1. In other words, Paul is going to describe in this text behavior he was not obligated to follow, but that he chose to follow.
  - 2. There is, as we've mentioned in previous lessons, real Christian liberty.
    - a. "You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh" (Gal 5:13).
    - b. The point here, however, is not Christian liberty. On the other hand, the point is Paul's willingly giving up that liberty—this is a decision of the will.
- C. Paul made himself a servant to all in order that he might win more of them.
  - 1. In other words, Paul wasn't concerned in what others could do for him, but what he could do for them.
  - 2. The aristocrats in Corinth—whom Paul spends much time addressing in this epistle—would not have liked these words at all.
    - a. You see, in Paul's day, aristocrats despised those who accommodated themselves to others—it was seen as a weakness or something below them. You simply did not give in to other people.
    - b. Even though it wasn't the aristocratic way, it was—and is—the way of Jesus:
      - Jesus "laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (Jn 13:4-5).

- As you know, feet washing was the work of servants.
  - And here was the Creator of the universe, the One whom angels praise, tying on a towel and stooping to wash feet.
  - Phil 2:5-8.
3. Paul became a servant in order that he might win more individuals.
- a. The term “win” was used in rabbinic literature to refer to the making of proselytes—this term makes clear that Paul has evangelism in mind.
  - b. Paul buys into the old cliché common in this country: “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”
- D. How is our service toward our fellow man this morning?
1. The Scriptures exhort us to serve one another:
    - a. In Luke 10, a lawyer said to Jesus that men were to love their neighbors as themselves.
      - Jesus commended him, but the lawyer sought to justify himself and asked, “And who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29).
      - Jesus then told what we term the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
      - At the conclusion of the parable, Jesus asked the lawyer which of the three—the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan—had shown mercy to the man among the robbers.
      - “He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You go, and do likewise’” (Lk 10:37).
    - b. “As we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal 6:10).
  2. Are we serving others that we might show the spirit of Jesus?
    - a. At work, are we willing to pull a double shift in order that a father with young children might be home when he’s needed?
    - b. Are we willing to take out the garbage for our next-door neighbor who has become so very feeble?
    - c. Are we willing to look for opportunities to live a life of service? As we live that life of service, are we doing so that we might bring people to Jesus?

### III. A SLACKER, vv. 20-22.

- A. What I mean in calling Paul a slacker is that the apostle was willing to be flexible—slack—depending on those around him. He writes: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (thought not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of Christ but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”
- B. As we look at this text, it is quite apparent that Paul is not at all declaring that he compromised the essentials of the gospel, for he says at v. 21 that he is not without the law of God but is under the law of Christ. Additionally, we need to understand that “all things to all people” isn’t too broad, for Paul doesn’t say that he became an adulterer when he was with adulterers or an idolater when he was with idolaters.
- C. Notice what Paul says he did:
  1. He became a Jew when around Jews.
    - a. In a sense, that’s surprising to read, for Paul was himself a Jew.
    - b. But, Paul well understood he was under no compulsion to follow the ceremonial laws of Moses, but he did it when he was around the Jews. For example, he circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3) and he took a vow (Acts 18:18).
  2. When he was around those under the law, he lived as though he were under the law—apparently Paul references proselytes or God-fearers here, for he has already mentioned the Jews.
  3. To those outside the law—Gentiles—he became as a Gentile himself. Paul, for example, used pagan poets rather than the Hebrew Scriptures as he preached at the Areopagus (Acts 17).
  4. To the weak, Paul became as though he were weak.

- a. This shouldn't be read to refer to weak Christians, for the purpose of Paul's becoming weak to the weak is winning them to Jesus.
  - b. It's also interesting to note that Paul doesn't say that he became strong when he was with the strong. That's simply because his purpose is to demonstrate humility and service to the strong in Corinth.
- D. How does this apply to us who aren't typically around that many different cultures?
1. Let's go at it from this angle: What of ourselves can we lay aside to help those around us come to know Jesus?
  2. Think with me:
    - a. Is there someone at work who absolutely loves basketball? Maybe I don't like the sport at all, but I might want to learn something about it in order to converse with him and build a friendship where Jesus can be demonstrated and taught?
    - b. Do I have a neighbor who has some warped views of Christianity he's developed because of poor Christian influences? Maybe he thinks it's wrong for a Christian to drive a nice car. I might want to drive a clunker so that I don't create an obstacle to teaching him the gospel.
    - c. Do I have a family member whom I want to influence who has the idea that Christians shouldn't eat in a place which serves alcohol? I might want to go to McDonald's rather than Applebee's so that I can influence her.
  3. Here's what the passage is challenging us to do: Give up our rights in order to share the gospel.
    - a. Those are quite challenging words to those of us raised in a culture which tells us to do whatever we want and not to care what other people think. In our culture, we're to be autonomous, and I'm not to care about what anyone else thinks of what I do.
    - b. This passage challenges us to give up that right and to serve with others in view. Why not? Did Jesus himself not give up some of his divine rights to come to this earth, serve us, and save us from sin?
    - c. Will you give up your rights to serve others?

IV. A SHARER, v. 23.

- A. "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."
- B. It's interesting that Paul says he becomes all things to all people, not to help them come to Jesus, but for the sake of the gospel.
  1. The use of the word "gospel" here indicates Paul's purpose.
    - a. His purpose was not simply to serve others because they bear God's image or to serve because Jesus taught we ought to serve.
    - b. His purpose in serving was to preach the gospel. Paul had an overarching concern to preach the gospel:
      - "At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak" (Col 4:3-4).
      - Notice also how Paul writes of his and Timothy's ministry: "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:20).
  2. Granted, the ideas of serving people and serving the gospel are not mutually exclusive, for gospel is the means by which God saves people.
    - a. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rm 1:16).
    - b. Thus, in a very real sense, teaching others the gospel is a form of serving them. Yet, Paul's purpose is serving in order to have opportunity to teach the gospel.
- C. Paul serves others to teach them the gospel in order that he may share in the gospel's blessings.
  1. There is a difference in translations here.
    - a. The ESV has "share with them in its blessings," meaning Paul will share with those whom he is teaching in the blessings of the gospel.
    - b. The KJV has "a partaker thereof with you," meaning Paul will share with the Corinthians in the blessings of the gospel.

- c. The NIV is the most accurate and reads: “that I may share in its blessings.”
  2. In the original, this verse literally reads: “And I am doing all things on account of the gospel, in order that I might be a participant of it.” Thus, Paul becomes all things to all people in order that he might have a part in the blessings of the gospel.
- D. What does this have to do with us? There are two implications:
1. We need to understand that there are blessings in the gospel.
    - a. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:3)—There is no spiritual blessing withheld for those who are in Christ.
    - b. There is one way to get into Christ where all these spiritual blessings are found?
      - “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27).
      - Thus, if we want to be a participant in the gospel’s blessings, we need to be baptized into Christ. Do you need to be baptized into Christ this morning?
  2. Paul was seeking to win the lost in hopes of sharing in the gospel’s blessings. If we aren’t sharing our faith, can we hope to share in the gospel’s blessings?
    - a. “If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand” (Ez 33:8).
    - b. “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away” (Jn 15:2).
    - c. Are we bearing fruit for God in order that we might share in the blessings of the gospel? Do you need to come this morning and commit yourself to bearing fruit and sharing in the blessings of the gospel?