

ON THE GO FOR GOD

A LIBERATING COMPASSION

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“A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all,
subject of all, subject to all.”

—**MARTIN LUTHER**

PROLOGUE

How are Christians to exercise their liberties?

In this study, Pastor Marvin R. Knight explains the different types of people Paul enslaved himself to in order to win them to Christ and how we can do the same.

¹⁹ For though I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may gain more. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might gain Jews; to those who are under the Law, *I became as one* under the Law, though not being under the Law myself, so that I might gain those who are under the Law; ²¹ to those who are without the Law, *I became as one* without the Law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might gain those who are without the Law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak; I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some. ²³ I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-23

1.

INTRODUCTION

The language of personal “rights” dots the context of these verses. Six times in the first 19 verses (verses 4, 5, 6, twice in verse 12, and 18), Paul uses himself as an example of *one who has rights but does not use the rights he possesses*. The reason is to use himself for illustrative purposes that we might imitate Him. Believers have rights, but the question is, how do we use those rights? Do we insist on our rights in order to impose our cultural or political convictions on others? Or do we flexibly exercise our rights so that we live for the benefit and salvation of others? Paul—like his Master, the Lord Jesus—never compromised on moral norms or fundamental truths of the Gospel. But in matters of custom and cultural practices, Paul exercised a liberating compassion that was quite adaptable so that others might find salvation. If we are to be “on the go for God,” we must learn how to show compassion without compromise.

2. CONTEXT

Let's set our text in its neighbor (context).

- In **verses 1-2**, Paul defends his right to *receive support as an apostle based upon apostolic credentials*.
- In **verses 3-7**, Paul uses seven rhetorical questions to argue that *he has the right to financial support*. All seven questions demand a “yes” answer to make his case. Playing off the rights that others have asserted to eat “food in an idol’s temple” (8:9-10), Paul says, I have rights too, but let me offer myself as an example of how you use your freedom or liberty. Paul says, beginning at...
 - **Verse 4**—I have a right to the necessities of *life*.
 - **Verse 5**—I have the right to be *married*—marriage was not considered a detriment to ministry.
 - **Verse 6**—I have the right to *financial support* so that I am free to pursue apostolic ministry.
 - **Verse 7**—Paul uses three rhetorical questions *taken from everyday life* to argue his right for support.

Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? No soldier has to supply his own provisions. Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its fruit? No farmer plants a vineyard and fails to eat its produce. Or who tends a flock and does not consume some of the milk of the flock? No shepherd expends energy and is prohibited from quenching his thirst with some of their milk.

The point: these *world examples* are compelling on their own based upon human judgment, but in typical rabbinical style, he argues from the lesser to the greater and quotes from Deuteronomy 25:4 to supports his argument.

- **Verses 8-11**—I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.” God is not concerned about oxen, is He? ¹⁰ Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to *thresh* in hope of sharing *the crops*. ¹¹ If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

In other words, if those who do material work should be rewarded for their labor, the same principle applies spiritually: those who labor in the Gospel should be rewarded materially by support (*Cf. Rom.15:27*). Paul’s argument is strong—both in ordinary life and the Scriptures, the conclusion is the same: those who are called to proclaim the Gospel have the right to be supported.

- **Verses 12-14**—Paul drives the nail into the floorboard by appealing to *the Old Testament* ([a portion to be eaten by Aaron and his sons (*Num.18:8; Deut.18:1-4*)], and the *words of our Lord Jesus* in Luke 10:7.
- **Verses 15-18**—Paul’s argument turns a sharp corner. He declares that he did not avail himself of the rights he possessed—not because the Corinthians did not want to support him, but rather, he wants to use his life as an illustration of what it means to forego your rights for the sake of the Gospel.

What it took me 521 words to say, Jonathan Edwards said in 31 words,

“Paul refused payment in money that he may make the greater gain in souls. But the gain is that which a faithful steward makes, not for himself, but for his Master.”

How can we use our freedom, not as an opportunity to pursue our own interests, but to zealously serve God and one another and win the lost to Christ?

3.

FOUR CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE

Verses 19-22 reveal four groups to whom Paul “enslaves” (*edoulosa*) himself. Though he is “free” (9:1, 19), he uses his freedom to give himself to others (*Gal.5:13*). His goal is not to restrict his rights, position, and desires to promote his own selfish ambitions. His aim is to “**win**” people to Christ. Five times the term “**win**” appears in verses 19-22, and it functions as a synonym of the word “**save**” in verse 22. Who are in these four categories, and what can we learn from Paul about how to have compassion without compromise?

1. **The first category is the Jews** (v.20a)—“*to the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews.*”

What is remarkable about this statement is that Paul was Jewish, but his ethnic identity was not the primary reality of his life. Paul identified himself as a Christian (2 Cor.5:16). What this means practically is simply that when Paul went among Jews, he followed Jewish customs concerning the Sabbath and purity laws (Ex. Timothy—Acts 16:1-3; 18:18; 21:20-25). In other words, he adapted by making concessions and living as a Jew when with the Jews in order to win them—that is, to bring them to faith and new life and Christ.

Application: How would this apply today?

2. **The second category is those under the Law** (v.20b)—“*... to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law.*”

This most likely refers to Gentiles who decided to live under the law as proselytes. Still, with those who lived under the Mosaic law, Paul adapted his practice and lived under the law as well for their sakes. In other words, Paul demonstrated compassion and did not flex his freedom in Christ. To make himself clear, Paul is careful to remind them that Christians are no longer under the law but under grace (*Rom.6:14-15*). Believers were held in custody under the law until faith in Christ was revealed (*Gal.3:23*), and Jesus redeemed and freed those who were under the law (*Gal.4:5*). In fact, as believers, rather than being under the law's power, judgment, and weight, we are led by the Spirit (*Gal.5:18*). This is important because those who are under the law are "under sin" (*Rom.7:14*), "under a curse" (*Gal.3:10*), and under guardians (*Gal.3:25; 4:2-3*). But the believer is happy under the law's direction, although he does not live under its penalty, which was satisfied in the life and death of Christ (*Cf. Rom.8:2-4*).

Application: How would this apply today?

3. **The third category is those who are without law (v.21)**—"*...to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God, but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.*"

Those without law were predominantly Gentiles. However, Paul was not saying that when seeking to win pagans, he became pagan and indulged so that they would like him. What does this mean? Paul means that before the Jew, he did not parade his liberties, and before the Gentiles, he did not impose his morals. Being without the law here is not a reference to the moral law but the ceremonial law. What Paul is speaking of here is that when he ministered to Gentiles, he dropped all of his non-moral Jewish traditions. He raised no unnecessary barriers. He did not

impose the law upon them (*Cf. Gal.2:12ff*). In other words, Paul practiced courtesy.

Application: How does this apply today?

4. **The fourth category is those who are weak (v.22)**—“*To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak;*”

This is a reference to the same group we met back in chapter 8 with a sensitive conscience. Paul is not saying that he became a weak Christian too, but rather, if he was with a weaker brother, he was careful not to violate their sensibilities. He was prepared to adapt his behavior so as not to offend them. In other words, Paul condescended in love in a way that he might win them to Christ.

He rounds off his argument by saying, “*I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some*” (v.22). Paul was willing to adapt culturally as long as it did not contradict or violate the law of Christ.

When Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission, started to wear his hair long and braided like the Chinese men of the time, and to put on their clothes and eat their food, many of his fellow missionaries criticized him. But Hudson Taylor had thought through what was essential to the Gospel, and therefore non-negotiable, and what was a cultural form that was neither here nor there and might, in fact, be an unnecessary barrier to the effective proclamation of the Gospel.

Application: How does this apply today?

Recap:

- To the Jews—under the law (*the religious*). Avoid needless offense.
- To the gentiles—outside of the law (*pagan*). Prepare to adapt (raise no unnecessary barriers).
- To the weak—those with a weak conscience. (*Sacrifice your rights, choose love*)
- To the Jews—give *concessions*.
- To the gentiles—give *courtesy*.
- To the weak—practice *condescension*.

How do you find the wisdom to be flexible or versatile?

- Understand the difference between condescension and compromise. To compromise is to set aside an essential Gospel truth and thereby alter or weaken the Gospel message. Paul never did this, and neither should we (2 Cor.2:17; Gal.5:11). But to condescend is to remove needless offenses to people's religious consciences by setting aside some personal, optional liberty.
- Know what your freedoms and constraints are in Christ. Paul's understanding of sound theology and his practical working knowledge of the truth enabled him to know four things:
 1. *Who he was*
 2. *What was expected of him*
 3. *What he was free to do*
 4. *What he should never consider doing under any circumstances*

Now the only way to achieve this maturity is to think through the Scriptures repeatedly and try to get a hold of the message and how it works in everyday life situations.

Where are the limits? How far can we go?

- *It must not lead us to do or tolerate that which is sinful.*
This principle was violated in the past, with Jesuit missionaries encouraged “professing converts” to retain part of their idolatrous worship.
- *It must not lead us to keep back any essential truth because it is unpopular.* Repentance, sin, hell, the abandonment of works as a merit of salvation, etc.
- *It must not lead us to do anything that would compromise the Christian name or the cause of Christ.*
Romans 14:16 says, “let not your good be spoken evil of.”

4.

ONE MAJOR COMMITMENT

- **Verse 22b-23**—I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. ²³I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

What Paul is saying is that if we are to live for the glory of God, there must be **a wholehearted dedication** (v.23). You must live for the Gospel in order to partake of it. The one word that Paul employs repeatedly is the word “**all**.” Someone has said that here the word all means that Paul had an “all-consuming love for lost souls.”

- **All things**—*speaks of our actions*. Paul says I have become all things, and I do all things for the sake of the Gospel. Every decision in my life is made with the Gospel in mind. Every vacation, every recreation, every expenditure, every plan, every partnership, everything, all in his life was dominated by this: how will this further the Gospel cause? Will this hinder the Gospel in any way?
- **All men**—*speaks of our attitude*. There was no prejudice in Paul’s heart, and this must not be any in us if we are to be effective soul winners for Christ. All men—of every background, race, culture, and character. From the man on Wall Street to the man on skid row, no one is exempt, and everyone is in need.
- **All means**—*speaks of our approach*. Paul would use all the means that God placed at his disposal for the salvation of sinners.

1. The first and foremost was preaching. (Rom.10:17)
2. The second was conversation. Paul could preach well to a congregation of one.
3. The third was writing. Word came by letter to some, and we call these the epistles.
4. The fourth was prayer. He bowed his knees before the Father in heaven. Oh, how true it is that stiff-kneed preachers often have stiff-necked people.
5. The fifth was living the truth. Here, perhaps, lays the transcendent power of Paul. He not only preached, talked, wrote, and prayed, but he also lived the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

All things, every action; all men, our attitude; all means, our approach...we may be used to save some. Paul was no Universalist. He could not hope for all, but if only SOME would yield. This was Paul's spiritual expectation. He knew that many were called, but a few were chosen, and they could come when they heard the Chief Shepherd calling, "Come, follow Me" (Matt.4:19 NIV). Save some. Will you be in the number? He did *"all things for the sake of the gospel, so that he may become a fellow partaker of it."*

