

Paul was a missionary. In the ancient Mediterranean world, there were a lot of cultures expressing themselves in that small geographic area. In the varying circumstances that Paul found himself in day by day, Paul committed himself not to exercise his right to pursue his own preferences. Instead, Paul forfeited his freedoms under the gospel. In today's passage, Paul will give two examples: Paul the slave and Paul the athlete. Both examples are aimed at us, and remind us of the main point today: that...**Christ gave us the way to gain souls: adaptive witnessing.**

### **1. loving - willing to adapt. (v.19-22)**

Listen to verse 19, "*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.*"

Here Paul is answering those who thought that Paul's freedoms had been lost. No, his freedoms had not been lost. His freedoms were forfeited. Who would do that? Why would Paul do that? Love. Paul was a missionary motivated by love. He came in order to win souls. Paul was willing to adapt in order to win their souls from death to life.

In verses 20-22, Paul gave examples of his own loving adaptation in order to win people. Paul showed how far Paul was willing to go to follow this policy. There were two extremes – Jews and Gentiles. The differences between these groups was enormous. Clothing, holidays, eating habits, religious beliefs, family practices, were so very different in Jewish circles and in Gentile circles.

In verse 20, Paul wrote "*I became as a Jew.*" An interesting statement, since Paul already was a Jew! Paul was released from Jewish ways when Paul understood that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. Paul was ethnically a Jew, yet by following Jesus, Paul was free from Jewish ways. What was Paul willing to do? Paul was willing to go back and become as a Jew. Wow. Maybe you came out of the Catholic church. would you be willing to go back and become as a catholic to your family and friends, in order to bless them with your knowledge of Jesus and His Word? This is what Paul did. "*To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.*" Or a missionary living in a Muslim country would dress like a Muslim and eat like a muslim in order to win muslims to Christ.

Paul understood that the Jews wanted to find favor with God by obeying the law. The Jews had become victims of the law. We know that relying on the law leads to frustration and failure. We just cannot be holy enough! The Jews kept trying and trying. The Jews had filled their lives with Biblical observances of the law and extra-Biblical observances of the law. Paul had tried that path, and it almost did him in! Paul tells about it over in Romans 7:7-14, "*What then shall we*

*say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.”*

The Jews had the mix of both law and sin, which is a deadly mix. Paul had the gospel, which means Paul was free from sin, and free from the slavery of the law. So, if Paul took the gospel and went back “under cover” as it were – under the law, then Paul could give the Jews the gospel. The Jews would be set free. The mix of both law and gospel is a life-giving mix. What was needed was for Paul to remember the gospel while living under the law “*in order to win the Jews.*”(v.20)

Paul had compassion for the Jews who were under the law and under sin. Paul wanted to free them from sin. Paul wanted to win them. Paul wanted to gain them for Christ. So, whenever Paul went to visit the Jewish communities, Paul cared so much about them that Paul personally observed their Jewish customs and their Jewish laws while he was with them, so that the gospel might take root in them too.

What would motivate Paul to go back to the law-bound ways from which he was freed? Love for the other law-bound souls! Paul wrote that to the law-bound people, Paul became as a law-bound person, in order to win those bound by the law. What would prevent Paul from going back to Judaism? Paul included the answer to that in verse 20, where Paul wrote, “*though not being myself under the law.*” Whenever Paul was with religious Jews, Paul always remembered that Paul did not seek justification with God through the law, but instead through faith in Jesus. Paul always remembered that Paul was not subject to the curse of the law, because of the cross of Jesus.

In verse 21, Paul gave another example of adaptive witnessing. What about reaching people who were outside the law? The Gentiles! What about them? Paul loved them too. They never even had the law. Paul showed that he understood the predicament of the Gentiles was even worse than the predicament of the Jews, when wrote in Ephesians 2:12, “*...you were...separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise, having*

*no hope and without God in the world.*” Paul was so filled with love for the Gentiles that in Romans 11:13, Paul called himself “*an apostle to the Gentiles.*” We learn in Acts 17:2, that Paul’s standard operating procedure upon Paul’s arrival at any new city, was to go first to the synagogues of the Jews. Why? Because Paul could reason with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that Jesus is the Christ.

But the Gentiles had no such Scriptures! It was God’s decision to send Paul to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. On the very first day of Paul’s conversion, we read in Acts 9:15, The Lord said that Paul “*is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.*” Paul repeated this in his letter to the Galatians, chapter 1:16, that God was “*pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles...*”

The point here is this – that when Paul was among Gentiles, Paul observed Gentile customs and Gentile laws, so that Paul could spread the gospel among Gentiles. That does not mean that Paul sinned. Rather, it means that Paul could drop the law’s ceremonial requirements that had been fulfilled in Christ, and Paul could live like a Gentile while at the very same time also living a holy life.

Paul was flexible. Paul was adaptable. But Paul always remembered what he wrote into verse 21, that Paul was not “*outside the law of God but under the law of Christ.*” When Paul was with the Gentiles, Paul would not stray into paganism. Paul was bound to keep the law of Christ, even as Paul “*became as one outside the law.*” Paul refused to fall into sin for the sake of others.

In verse 22, Paul added yet another category of people, the weak. In contrast to the bold Christians in Corinth who sinned against the tender people in Corinth by eating meat that had been offered to idols, Paul went the other direction. Instead of Paul eating the meat because of his knowledge and confidence, Paul rather set aside his knowledge and set aside his boldness and set aside his personal confidence and he made the decision to become like the tender to win the tender ones. Paul wrote “*I became weak, that I might win the weak.*” Paul changed his behaviors to be the same behaviors of those with tender consciences. Since they thought it was sin to eat meat, Paul joined them in avoiding that meat. Paul limited his own freedom in this way, in order to not cause tender brothers to fall into sin. NOTICE: the phrase “*win the weak*” is not referring to salvation for the weak, like it was for win the Jews and win the Gentiles. Win the weak is not salvation but rather growth and sanctification. So, we learn something new in this example – that Paul had set aside his own freedoms for the salvation of Jews, for the salvation of Gentiles, but Paul also set aside his own freedoms for the growth of weak Christians with overly-tender consciences. Paul is calling us not just to missionary sacrifices for the salvation of the lost, but also to shepherding sacrifices for the growth of our brothers and sisters in the Lord! Both missionary efforts and

shepherding efforts. Both outreach and discipleship. Both reaching the lost and building up the saints. That is new to this example of the weak. And it elicits a question in us – how far was Paul willing to go to sacrifice his own rightful privileges for others salvation and for others growth? We have Jews, Gentiles, and weak. How far would Paul go?

Paul answers that in a surprising way at the end of verse 22, when he generalized his strategy to lovingly adapt, by writing how far Paul was yet willing to go, “*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.*” Paul would do all things. How far would Paul go? Paul would do anything. Basically, Paul submitted to everyone so that by all possible means, Paul might bring some to salvation and cultivate growth in others. For Paul the missionary, it is clear that the way to build the kingdom is to convert more lost souls and provide growth to Christians. Paul’s freedoms needed to be set aside for this greater goal.

This is consistent with how Paul started this three-chapter section in chapter 8:1, that knowledge alone “*puffs up*” and makes a person not care about the well-being of others. But “*love builds up.*”

Love for others leads a Christian to perform those actions that bring as many people as possible into the kingdom of Christ, and to shepherd them to maturity in the kingdom.

Loving others makes us willing to adapt to their ways to win their souls.

This is not foolishness, as the world says.

This is wisdom. Proverbs 11:30, “*WHOEVER WINS SOULS IS WISE.*”

And remember what Jesus said to Peter, while predicting his denial, what Peter must do after the denial. Luke 22:32, “*I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, STRENGTHEN YOUR BROTHERS.*”

Christ and the apostles all teach that the role of Christians is both to reach the lost and to strengthen our weaker brothers.

**2. disciplined – able to remain the bridge from unbelievers to Christ, without compromising nor pulling away. (v.23-27)**

We will come back to verse 23. Right now, we skip over it for a moment.

In verses 24-27, Paul used two athletic analogies that showed the seriousness of the matter. Because of the running events called the Isthmian Games that happened in Corinth, these were relevant examples. There were several connections between athletics and the Christian life.

The first connection between athletics and the Christian life is that not everyone finishes the race. Not everyone who starts out a race, ends up the race and gets the prize at the end. Not everyone who starts out as a Christian endures until the end.

The second connection between athletics and the Christian life is in verse 25,

where athletes go into strict training. Christians must also show self-control and self-denial, such as forfeiting entitlements for the sake of a brother or sister. Christians must show development spiritually. Christians must discipline ourselves to do what is needed, to do what is best, to do what is loving, and to perform whatever best would advance the Kingdom and the church.

Then there is also a contrast between athletics and the Christian life. The runners in the ancient races in Corinth had to train for that race for 10 months, and then they ran for the prize of a wreath made of celery. Can you imagine? Ten months of agony, for a ring of celery. The celery might not last more than 2 days. The prize will not last. It is perishable. How different is the prize that Christians receive at the end of our race! An imperishable prize! Our prize will last forever. If someone is converted, that results in everlasting life. 2 Timothy 2:10, “...*obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.*” Romans 2:7, “...*by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality...*” The apostle Peter knows this too, as he wrote in 1 Peter 5:4, “...*when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*”

Verse 26, Paul drew implications from the racing runners. “*So, I do not run aimlessly...*” Paul is not just out for a jog. Paul’s missionary life is not just a big hippie, free-wheeling adventure to see where it goes. Paul has an aim. Paul has a goal. Paul had a prize in mind that he was intent on winning.

Paul suddenly shifted to a second athletic analogy – boxing. Same ideas here. As compared to a boxer, Paul was not missing with his punches. Paul was hitting the target with each punch. Listen to Paul in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.*” Whether running or boxing, whether writing to Corinth or writing to Timothy, we understand Paul’s goal. Paul’s target was to stay on target, to hit the target. Paul’s goal was to build up the kingdom both numerically and in the growth of character of believers.

In the last verse, Paul showed Paul’s vigorous pursuit of the goal. Verse 27, “*But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*” Paul disciplines himself. The phrase is to give himself a black eye, and the phrase is used in boxing to actually beat black and blue. Of course Paul is not literally doing that anymore than Paul is literally running a race. Rather, both the racing and the boxing analogy line up with this phrase “*I discipline my body and keep it under control*” to show that Paul has placed himself on a severe regimen in order to strictly control his own person. Why? Paul was denying himself as athletes deny themselves for the sake of winning. Why? To make sure that after Paul has blessed others with his preaching,

that Paul would not be rejected for the prize. This does not mean Paul would lose salvation, but rather about never having had salvation. Namely, that if Paul fell away from Christ, and was disqualified to receive the blessings of salvation, it would mean that Paul had never been truly saved in the first place! Follow the race idea. If Paul did not finish the race, then Paul would not get the prize. Follow the boxing idea. If Paul did not win the fight against his own sinful nature, Paul would not endure to the end by keeping the faith to the close of his life.

Paul's spiritual life was lived like an athlete trains. Paul gave up his own rights for the sake of others. Self-denial in the service of others is an essential practice for Christians and it is a difficult thing to start, more difficult to continue, and most difficult of all to endure to the end. Paul knew how difficult it was. Paul knew what it would take. Paul knew that the bold Christians in Corinth needed to give up something. Instead of nagging on them to do so, Paul used himself as an example for them to follow. Since Paul was willing to make such sacrifices, the Corinthians should be willing also.

In order to encourage the Christians to forfeit their benefits for the sake of other Christians, Paul described his entire ministry as one of sacrifice and accommodation to others.

### **3. intentional – do it for the goal of gaining souls, including our own. (v.23)**

Paul's motivation was for the souls of others, but also for his own soul. Notice in verse 23, that Paul gets his share of the blessings of the gospel. Paul knew that God would grant blessings to Paul for doing all of this sacrificing for the sake of the gospel.

If you eat the meat, you destroy you brother. It reveals your heart is selfish. The result? Temporary blessings, and long-term negative results count against you in God's kingdom economy.

If you forfeit the meat, you gain your brother. This reveals the state of your heart is loving. The result? A temporary sacrifice and forfeiture, with a long-term positive result that counts for you in God's kingdom economy. Paul gains!

Missionary Jim Elliot's best-known quote is, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose."

Paul was no fool. Paul was wise and Christ-like.

The apostle John stated it this way in 1 John 4:20, "...*he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.*"

The gospel is that there is One who came and sacrificed to gain souls. Jesus Christ left heaven and sacrificed His form of being equal with God and the freedoms of that! He sacrificed that to be confined to a human body and the limit of being in one geographic location. He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Christ gained the souls of all

believers!

The confident bold people within the church in Corinth understood their rights, but they had forgotten the higher importance of love for others that flows out of our love for God, which flows out of God's love for us.

Did God want to give you the meat, only to make you give up the meat?

No, God wanted to give you a new heart that desires something better than the meat. Then, you get God, win your brother, and then you and your brother can enjoy the meat together.

God wants us to be free from the individualism of seeking good only for ourselves, and enter the greater pathway of seeking the best good for all.

**Conclusion: two applications. 1) strengthen your brothers. 2) love the lost.**

**1) develop a deeper love for your brothers and sisters in the Lord.** What would you be willing to sacrifice for the unity of the church? What would you be willing to do to bridge the gap that exists between you and that sister in the Lord, that brother in Christ? How could you help to be a peacemaker? What sacrifices would you make? What price have you paid to beautify the body of Christ? How much do you prize the unity of the brotherhood in our church and across Christian communities? What adaptations would you need to make to communicate to that Christian that you love him or her in the Lord? Sending the right message in the right way will cost you something. Is that a price you are willing to pay? What do you treasure? It is a searching question. Those who love Christ, love the church of Christ. That brings us to our second and last application today.

**2) Develop a deeper love for lost souls.** A love for the lost that gets deeper and reaches the point where you would give up something for their spiritual good. What would you give up? Would you open your home and give up an evening for a Bible study? Would you bring food and wonder if it will be received well? Would you give up comfort? Would you set a lunch appointment with a co-worker, and throughout that meal just show that you care? Would you invite your neighbors over for a meal, just to say how have things been going for you? Would you invite a family member to come to church with you? Would you let your co-worker get the good contract, the choice assignment, while you work on something not as enjoyable? Would you ask yourself – what must it be like to live a day in the life of that lost soul? SI – we receive a mailing here in Menomonee Falls where I live, that showcases one family in our village. The most recent one highlights a homosexual couple with children. Two women posing as a family. At first, I was sad to see the publication. But then I started to imagine what must daily life be like for people who are directly opposing God, and flaunting it? What would a day in their lives be like? What pain drove them to embrace this wrong pathway? Instead of thinking of myself, I began to think about them. Maybe, I will have an

opportunity to practice what I preach – adaptive witnessing. Would it be out of the realm of possibilities for me to invite that homosexual couple over to our home for a cookout this Spring or Summer? Paul says, I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. Of course, if they get converted, it means radical changes, doesn't it? Temporary changes, that lead to eternal life and joy and favor from God. Jesus died and rose to save the lost from their sins, not to leave them in their sins. Do we love the lost enough to start those conversations? Do we love them enough to have those conversations in a courteous and winsome way, showing the compassion of our Savior? Do we even have the compassion of our Savior? Or do we just have a strong visceral reaction to reject them and run away? God wants to save sinners and grow his church through His Word and His gospel being proclaimed and His people showing love to the lost. Listen, Paul is saying if Paul preached to others, but then Paul did not grow in having the correct heart attitude toward the lost, then Paul never did have Christian faith. If we don't desire the advance of the gospel, we must question the existence of saving faith in ourselves. We will be busy doing something to serve Christ The King. Those who love the gospel, love the lost who need the gospel. We will learn more and more to adapt and to witness.