

1 Corinthians 9:19-27 Adaptive Witnessing Falls Ch. PM 4/21/2024

The book of 1 Corinthians exists because Paul did not stay in Corinth. He left, and wrote this letter back to the church in Corinth. Where did Paul go?

Answer: Paul was a traveling missionary, lovingly seeking to win lost souls. Throughout the ancient Mediterranean world where Paul traveled as a missionary, there were a lot of cultures expressing themselves in that small geographic area. In the varying circumstances in which Paul found himself day by day, Paul committed himself not to exercise his right to pursue his own preferences. Instead, Paul forfeited his freedoms. In this passage, Paul gave two examples: Paul as a slave and Paul as an athlete. Both examples were given to show us the main point: 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 was answering those who thought that Paul’s freedoms had been lost. No, his freedoms had not been lost. Instead, Paul’s freedoms were forfeited. Why would Paul do that? Love. Paul was a missionary, motivated by love. He traveled from one place to another, in order to win as many souls as possible. Paul was willing to adapt in order to win their souls over from spiritual death into everlasting spiritual life.

In verses 20-22, Paul gave examples of his own loving missionary adaptation in order to win people. In these 3 verses, Paul showed just how far Paul was willing to go to adapt for the benefit of others in 3 groups. The first two groups were Jews and Gentiles. The differences between Jewish group of people and the Gentile group of people was enormous. They were different in just about everything: religious beliefs, family practices, eating habits, holidays, and even clothing. Jewish lives were so very different from Gentile lives.

In verse 20, Paul wrote “*I became as a Jew.*” An almost humorous statement, since Paul *already was a Jew ethnically!* So, it shows us that Paul was not talking about becoming an ethnic Jew, but something else. Paul still was ethnically a Jew, of course, and yet by deciding to follow Jesus, Paul had been freed from following Jewish ways religiously. Paul had been released from Jewish religious practices when Paul had come to understand that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. What was Paul willing to do now for the Jewish group of people? Paul was willing to revert back and become as a Jew all over again!

Paul understood that religiously, the Jews were making the mistake of striving to find favor with God by obeying their religious customs. Because this mistake was leaving the Jews in spiritual death, it was Paul who understood that the Jews had become victims of the law. Paul knew what the Jews knew – that relying on the strict adherence to religious rules leads to frustration and failure,

because none of us can be holy enough! But the Jews were stuck; they kept trying and trying to be pure enough for God by following laws found in the older books of the Bible. The Jews had filled their lives with Biblical observances of the law and they were trying so hard that they added additional requirements onto themselves that were not even in the Biblical law. Formerly, Paul had tried living that path, and it almost did him in!

Paul had the gospel, which meant that Paul was free from sin, and also free from the slavery of the law. So, if Paul took the gospel and went back into Jewish religious practices, back under the law, as it were, then Paul could have social and friendly access to the Jews, in order to share with them the gospel! If Paul did that, there was hope that the Jews could be set free. The Jews had the mix of two things - law and sin, which was a deadly mix. Paul sought to give them a different mix - the mix of both the law and the gospel - as a life-giving mix! Since Paul had re-entered Jewish religious life, what was crucially needed was for Paul himself to remember the gospel, while he was morphing himself back into the lifestyle of a Jew living under the law. Why would Paul subject himself all over again to all of these uncomfortable and sometimes repulsive religious practices? The simple answer is in v.20, "*in order to win the Jews.*"

This was motivated by love for their souls. Paul had compassion for the Jews who were under the law and under sin. Paul wanted to free the Jews from their sin. Paul wanted to win the hearts of the Jews to faith in Christ. Paul wanted to gain their hope in Christ. So, whenever Paul went to visit the Jewish communities, Paul cared so much about them that Paul was willing to personally observe their Jewish customs and their Jewish laws while he was with them, so that the gospel might take root in their lives!

What was it that would motivate Paul to go back to the law-bound ways from which he was previously set free? Love! Love for those other law-bound souls! Paul wrote to the law-bound people, writing that Paul himself became as a law-bound person, in order to win those bound by the law. Was this dangerous? What if Paul forgot? What would prevent Paul from slipping all the way back into Judaism? The answer was that Paul had been fundamentally changed when Paul discovered grace, as Paul wrote in verse 20, "*though not being myself under the law.*" Whenever Paul was around the religious Jews, Paul always remembered that Paul no longer sought justification with God through the efforts at keeping the law, but instead Paul sought justification with God through faith in Jesus. Paul always remembered that Paul was not subject to the curse of the law, because the cross of Jesus was where the curse of the law was fully paid.

In verse 21, Paul gave a second example of adaptive witnessing to a second group of people. What about reaching people who were outside the law? The Gentiles! What about them? Paul loved Gentiles too. The Gentiles never even had

the advantage of receiving a law from God. As a result, as Paul understood, the spiritual predicament of the Gentiles was even worse than the spiritual predicament of the Jews. Paul described it over 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 their Scriptures, explaining and proving that Jesus is the Christ.

But the poor Gentiles had no such Scriptures! It was God’s merciful decision to send Paul to the Jews first, and then to send Paul to the Gentiles as well. On the very first day of Paul’s conversion, we read in Acts 9:15, The Lord stated 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 in our study in 1 Corinthians 9 is adaptive witnessing. It was not just Paul reaching Jews. It was also that when Paul was among Gentiles, Paul observed Gentile customs and Gentile laws, so that Paul could spread the gospel among Gentiles. That did not mean that Paul sinned by following Gentiles into worshipping false gods or other sinful practices. No. Rather, adaptive witnessing as a missionary to the Gentiles meant that Paul could ignore whichever of the Jewish law’s ceremonial requirements that had now been fulfilled by the coming of Christ, and Paul could adapt and live like a Gentile in terms of ignoring the Jewish ceremonial laws. However, in terms of the moral laws of God, Paul was committed among the Gentiles, to living a holy life as a missionary.

Paul was adaptable. Paul was flexible. Paul was holy. Paul always remembered what he wrote into verse 21, that Paul was not “*outside the law of God but under the law of Christ.*” That means that whenever Paul was with the Gentiles, Paul would not go so far into becoming like a Gentile that he would actually stray into paganism. Rather, Paul remained bound to keep the law of Christ, even as Paul adapted as he wrote in verse 21, and he “*became as one outside the law.*” Paul adapted, but he stopped short of falling into sin for the sake of evangelizing others. Christ never asked His apostle Paul to adapt right on into sinning. Christ never allowed His apostle Paul to adapt right on into sinning.

In verse 22, Paul added yet a 3rd 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, here Paul went the other direction. Instead of Paul joining in with the bold and eating the meat because of his

knowledge and confidence, Paul rather set aside his own knowledge and set aside his own boldness and set aside his own personal confidence and Paul made the adaptive decision to become like the tender ones, in order to win the tender ones. Here is how Paul put it in verse 22, “*I became weak, that I might win the weak.*” Paul changed his behaviors to line up as the same behaviors of those with tender consciences. Since the weak ones thought it could be a sin to eat meat, Paul joined them in avoiding that meat. Paul curtailed and limited his own freedom in this way, in order to not cause his tender brothers to fall into sin.

NOTICE SOMETHING IMPORTANT IN THIS 3<sup>RD</sup> GROUP: the phrase “*win the weak*” was not referring to salvation for the weak. The phrase win the Jews and win the Gentiles were referring to salvation for Jews and Gentiles. But here, the phrase ‘Win the weak’ referred not to salvation for the weak, but rather referred to the weak being won when the weak experience growth and sanctification. So, we learn something new in this third example of a third group for whom Paul was adapting. Paul had set aside his own freedoms for the salvation of Jews and for the salvation of Gentiles, but Paul also set aside his own freedoms for the growth of weak Christians who had overly-tender consciences.

This is profound. Adapting is not just for missionaries and for evangelizing, but also for growth. Paul was calling Christians not merely to missionary sacrifices for the salvation of the lost, but also to shepherding sacrifices for the deepening understanding of our brothers and sisters in the Lord! We make sacrifices for two kinds of things: missionary efforts and shepherding efforts. We make sacrifices for two kinds of things: both outreach and discipleship.

Thinking about this for just a few seconds causes an immediate question in us – how far was Paul willing to adapt to sacrifice his own rightful privileges for the salvation of others and for the growth of others? We now have 3 groups: Jews, Gentiles, and weak. Our question is this: how far would Paul go?

Paul actually answered that in a surprising way at the end of verse 22, when he generalized his strategy to lovingly adapt for the spiritual benefit of various people, by writing a statement about just how far Paul has already gone, and also how far would be willing to go. Here is Paul’s statement in verse 22, “*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? Answer: 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 some others. For Paul the missionary, it was clear that the way to build the kingdom was extensive, to convert more lost souls and intensive, to provide growth for Christians. Paul’s freedoms needed to be set aside for both of these greater goals – conversions and discipleship.

This was 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*” making a person care about the spiritual well-being of unbelievers, and to care about the discipleship of fellow believers.

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

Loving others makes us willing to adapt to them, in order to win their souls.

This is not foolishness, as the world says it is.

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

This all fits with what Jesus said to Peter - while Jesus was predicting Peter’s 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.*” We have love for our brothers and sisters, such that as we walk with Christ, we are urged to strengthen each other.

Christ and His apostles all teach that the dual role of Christians is two things - 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 athletic running events called the Isthmian Games that took place in Corinth, these 2 analogies were relevant examples.

The first connection between athletics and the Christian life was in verse 24, that not everyone finishes the race. Not everyone who starts out a race, ends up at the finish line of the race and gets a prize at the end. Not everyone who starts out saying he or she is a Christian, also endures until the end of his or her life still saying he or she is a Bible-believing Christian.

The second connection between athletics and the Christian life was in verse 25, where athletes needed to enter into strict training. Just like athletes, so also Christians must show self-control and self-denial, such as forfeiting what belongs to you, for the sake of a brother or a sister. Christians must show strengthening and development, spiritually. Christians must discipline ourselves to do what the situation requires, to do what is loving, and to perform whatever would best advance the Kingdom and the church.

Then in verse 25b, Paul gave a contrast between athletics and the Christian life, a difference. 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. Without refrigerators, a celery wreath might not last more than 2 days. The prize would not last. The prize was perishable. How different will be the prize that we Christians receive at the

end of our race! An imperishable prize! Our prize will last forever. If because of your efforts, by God's grace someone is converted, that would result in everlasting life. What a difference in lasting value as prize from a perishable circle of celery!

Verse 26, Paul drew implications from the runners in a race. "*So, I do not run aimlessly...*" Paul was not just setting out for a meandering jog, without any set destination or planned out running routes. No, Paul's missionary life was not just some free-wheeling adventure to see where it went. No. Paul had an aim. Paul had a goal. Paul had a prize in mind, that Paul was intent on winning.

Verse 26b was where Paul added a second athletic analogy – boxing. The same ideas from the illustration of running were illustrated again here from the illustration of athletic boxing. As compared to a boxer, Paul was not missing with his punches. Paul was hitting the target with each punch. Remember that Paul wrote to Timothy 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 ultimate goal. Paul was determined to stay on target, to hit the target. Paul's goal was to build up the kingdom both numerically and in the deepening character of other 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 disciplined himself. The Greek phrase he used here, almost humorously, meant to give himself a black eye, and the phrase was used in boxing to actually a beating until the place is black and blue. Of course, Paul was not literally giving himself a black eye any more than Paul was literally running a race. Rather, both the racing analogy and the boxing analogy lined up with Paul's phrase "*I discipline my body and keep it under control*" to show that Paul had placed himself on a severe regimen in order to strictly control his own person. Why? Paul was denying himself for the same reason that athletes deny themselves - for the sake of winning. Winning what? 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 very final close of his life. 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! Paul wanted to keep himself under control so that on his final day on this earth, Paul was still trusting in Christ for salvation!

Paul wanted to win souls, including winning his own soul!

Paul's whole spiritual life was lived just like an athlete trains. Paul denied himself and gave up his own rights. Self-denial in the service of others was an essential practice for Paul, and so for all Christians. Self-denial was a difficult thing to start doing, more difficult to continue doing, and most difficult of all to continue to do until the complete and final 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 in chapter 8 for church unity. So, in chapter 9, instead of nagging them to do so, Paul used himself as an example for them to follow. Since Paul was willing to make such sacrifices, the Corinthians were being called to follow Paul, and be willing also to make such sacrifices.

In order to encourage the Christians to forfeit their own valid benefits for the sake of other Christians, Paul described his entire apostolic ministry as one of sacrifice and a life of constant 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. This is where we go back and notice verse 23, that Paul desired 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.

It would have been so much easier and simple if Paul just ate the meat with the bold crowd, but if Paul did that, Paul would have destroyed his brother. It would have revealed that Paul's heart was still caught in selfishness. The result? Short-term pleasure of having the meat with his bold brothers, but long-term negative results that would count against him and others in God's kingdom economy.

On the other hand, if Paul forfeited the meat, Paul gained his brother. This would reveal the spiritual condition of his new heart was genuinely loving. The result? A short-term sacrifice and forfeiture of enjoying some meat, with a long-term positive result that counted for him and others in God's kingdom economy. By selecting the option of Paul sacrificing the eating of the meat, Paul actually gained in the long-run! Paul was smart! Paul was wise. Paul was calling the Corinthians to be wise!

SI - a famous Missionary was martyred at age 28 in 1956 doing missionary work among a violent tribe. You probably know the outline of his story and so you know that his name was Jim Elliot. He graduated from Wheaton College just six years after Billy Graham did. Jim Elliot died at age 28. Billy Graham lived to be 99. Would you say that Jim Elliot went too far? Would you say it was unwise, or a shame, or a waste? Let me read you the best-known quote from Jim Elliot, a journal entry of his in 1949, seven years before he died, which was, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose."

Jim Elliot died doing adaptive missionary work. Jim Elliot was no fool. Paul was no fool. Paul was wise and Paul was 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 Himself in order to gain souls. Jesus Christ left heaven and sacrificed His form of being equal with God and the tremendous freedoms of that status of being divine! Jesus sacrificed divine status to be confined to a human body and became limited to one geographic location at a time. Jesus 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 flowed out of their love for God, which flowed out of God’s love for them.

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

No, God wanted to give them a new heart that desired something better than the meat. Then, they get God, win their brother, and then they and their brothers can enjoy the meat together.

God wanted 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: 1) we strengthen our brothers. 2) we love the lost.**

**1) we develop a deeper love for our brothers and sisters in the Lord.**

What would we be willing to sacrifice for the unity of the church? What would we be willing to do in order to bridge the gap that exists between ourselves and that sister or brother in the Lord? How could we help to be a peacemaker? What personal sacrifices would we make? What price have we paid to beautify the body of Christ? What adaptations would we need to make to communicate to that Christian that we love him or her in the Lord? Sending the right message in the right way will cost us something. Is that a price we are willing to pay? What do we treasure? It is a searching question. Those who love Christ, love other Christians.

**2) We develop a deeper love for lost souls.** Our love for the lost gets deeper and reaches the point where we would give up something for their spiritual good. What would we give up? Would we open our home and give up an evening for a Bible study? Would we give up comfort? Would we set a lunch appointment with a neighbor or co-worker, just to show that we care? Would we invite our neighbors over for a meal, just to ask how have things been going for you? Would we invite a family member to come to church with us? Would we ask ourselves – what must it be like to live a day in the life of that lost soul? Those who love the gospel, love the lost who need the gospel. We will learn more and more to adapt and to witness.

Proverbs 11:30, “*whoever wins souls is wise.*”