

**Engage the World with the Gospel**  
**Proclaiming the Unchanging Gospel Contextually**  
**1 Corinthians 9:19-23**

**I may have mentioned once or twice or maybe about ten times that I am reading through the ESV Study Bible notes along with my reading of the NT this year. I begin with the introduction to the NT book that I am reading, then I read the text along with the notes. I am surprised at how much I am remembering, how much I am processing differently, and how much I am learning in my studies/devotional reading of the NT.**

**In our series on outreach, titled Engage the World with the Gospel, I am, as you are aware, reading from texts in many different NT books to see the different ways believers are encouraged to engage unbelievers with the gospel. Today's message is a challenge to know how to share the unchanging gospel with both religious and non-religious people alike, which covers just about everyone. It is not that the Apostle Paul gives specifics in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, but he offers general principles for how to engage others. We can get a sense of both what he *is* and what he *is not* saying from the rest of the rather lengthy letter he wrote to the Church at Corinth.**

**It has been my practice this year to go ahead and read most, if not all, of the various NT books where the passages for these messages are found. So, this week, I have read 1 Corinthians along with the ESV Study Bible notes. I discovered the same thing this week that I have seen every week – the sermon will be different than it would have been had I not read the book as part of the preparation for the message. What is the lesson? The importance of context. You probably know the first three rules of interpreting Scripture – context, context, context. There is a great deal more, but the setting for a passage of Scripture helps you to know what the writer is, and,**

is not, saying. We are going to see how that works as we examine this morning's text.

First, we will read the text, which will be familiar to many, if not most, of you. Then, I will spend a bit of time exegeting the text, or, trying to understand what the Apostle Paul is getting at in the passage and what some of the specific language means. We will seek to determine his meaning here by what he says throughout 1 Corinthians. At that point, we will have our marching orders by way of the example Paul lays out for us. Let's get started by reading the text, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Would you please stand for the reading of the word?

**19** For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. **20** 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 (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. **21** To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. **22** 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. **23** I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Is this a familiar passage of Scripture to you? I imagine most believers have heard, somewhere along the way, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." But what does it mean?

In verse 19, Paul begins by stating that he is free from all. In the verses just before verse 19, he points to his refusal to take money from the Corinthians when he was with them because it would have given his critics ammunition in their claim that Paul was no big deal, even though he claimed to be an apostle. As I have said before,

when Paul's authority as an apostle was at stake, the very truth of the gospel was at stake, so it was important for Paul to say that no one controlled him with money. Furthermore, Paul was free from the ceremonial regulations of the Mosaic Law. Even so, he became servant to all. Some want to use this text as an excuse to be just like the world, but that was not what Paul was suggesting. He was saying the opposite, in fact – I am servant to all. The apostle was in possession of the most important truth known to mankind, but he didn't make people come to him to learn the ways of God. He became their servant so that he might gain a hearing, even though sharing the gospel earned him multiple beatings, ridicule, stoning, and imprisonment. Verse 20:

**“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 (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.”** Paul was already a Jew, but he was the Apostle to the Gentiles, and he enjoyed his freedom in Christ. Even so, he was willing to live under the law's restrictive regulations so that perhaps Jews would listen to the gospel. As you know, religious people won't listen to grace talk if you are irreligious. Paul made it clear that though he lived, at times, according to the law, he was not bound by the law.

In verse 21, Paul shares a model for ministry with more secular minded men and women when he writes that he lives in a way to gain a hearing from them, also. To say that he was, nonetheless, under the law of Christ was a statement declaring Paul's commitment to living by the moral code that Jesus laid down – a higher standard than the OT law because Jesus often added motives to one's actions. The frequent rebukes he issued to the Corinthians because of their worldliness tells us Paul sought to live a holy life.

Verse 22 gets a bit tricky. **“To the weak, I became weak, that I might win the weak.”** One of the controversial issues in Corinth was

**the legitimacy of buying and eating meat that had been offered to idols in pagan temples and was sold at a discount in the marketplace. Should one eat such meat or not? On the one hand, Paul said, “No big deal to me. An idol is dead, so I am not worried about it.” There is more to this topic that we have time to absorb today, but just to let you know that some of the pagan temples had banquet halls attached to them where meat that had been sacrificed to idols was served. Although the banquet may have had nothing to do with the idols that were housed in the temples, the question arose, should believers attend and eat? Paul said no – do not to eat at those places because in a sense, you participate with idols when you eat. But, back to the original question – what about meat sold in the market? It is okay to eat that meat unless it bothers a brother or sister. “You would eat that? I don’t think I would be able to eat meat offered to idols and feel good about my relationship with the Lord.” That is a classic statement by a weaker brother. What should you do in such a case? Don’t eat the meat! All of this to say that Paul was more concerned about others than he was himself. The one truly confusing thing here is that everywhere else, the one who is weak is a believing brother who is having trouble with his conscience. We are not sure if this weak person is a believer or a legalist who is having trouble with the gospel. Either way, go easy with him.**

**In verse 23 Paul says that he does all for the sake of the gospel, which builds individuals into a body blessed with the presence of the Lord for all eternity. Okay, it doesn’t say all that in verse 23, but it is exactly what Paul meant, as you will discover when you read the rest of 1 Corinthians. In view of the entire letter, we are going to take some time to think about what Paul is saying and what he is not saying when he affirms his commitment to become all things to all people so that by all means he might save some. Let’s think first about what Paul is NOT saying about his efforts to witness to as**

many people as possible with the full expectation that some will be saved. First,

What Paul is *not* saying in 1 Cor 9:19-23 about outreach

1. The goal is to get along - compromise the gospel to bring more people into the church (1:18-25)

If you were to happen upon our text without understanding a bigger picture in Scripture, you might think, “Goodness – this Apostle Paul will say anything to get people to believe. He is only interested in numbers!” Or, you might think, “This is great – everyone can feel comfortable here!” If you have read carefully to this point in 1 Corinthians, though, you realize that Paul is anything but pliable when it comes to the power of the gospel message. He recognized that the idea of a crucified Savior was ridiculous and scandalous to Greeks and it was a massive stumbling block to Jews, who thought the Messiah would be a military deliverer for God’s people.

The point of becoming all things to all people is not to adjust the gospel. Paul preached that our sin problem is so great that someone had to live a perfect life and, thus, become a perfect sacrifice for sin. Jesus, the God-man, was the only eligible substitute – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All sinners are invited to believe Jesus. In this sense, Christianity is a 100% inclusive religion – no one is excluded except for unbelief. On the other hand, the gospel is an exclusive message – only those who acknowledge their sin and believe that Jesus died in their place to save them from their sins will become children of God.

Have you ever thought, “I would like to invite my friend to come to church, but I think he would feel so judged and I don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable”? I hear your heart and I appreciate your concern for your friend. The truth of the gospel is never going

to change, though, and sooner or later all will be confronted with the weight of their sin. If you bring someone to church who disagrees with the message, my desire would be that she would say, “I don’t get it. That is certainly not what I wanted to hear, but people seem to be genuinely friendly and caring, even knowing my beliefs.” All things to all people is not about having others like what you have to say. It is about others being willing to listen to you. The second thing Paul was not saying is that you should:

2. Depend on your knowledge and personality to persuade people to believe (2:1-5, 12-16)

In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were many different models that were used to present the gospel to those who don’t know Jesus. If you have done much witnessing, you have more than likely employed one of those models or used a combination of The Roman Road, Evangelism Explosion, The Four Spiritual Laws or something similar. Today’s evangelism models are more likely to be presented in story form, and I far prefer those – something along the lines of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. Although I am not focusing on any of these models during Sunday mornings, we will have a panel to discuss various witnessing models on the last Wednesday night in August – August 30<sup>th</sup>, to be exact. That will be our next session of Grace Matters, and I want to encourage you to be here as we think about better ways to witness.

Even so, while models and methods give structure to our presentation of the gospel, if the Holy Spirit is not working, there will be no decision for Christ. Let me rephrase that – if the Holy Spirit is not working, there will be no *lasting* decision for Christ. I could go on about this, but best to hear Paul’s words about his initial encounter with his readers. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5:

**2:1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.**

**Amen! One more thing we need to see that Paul was *not* saying:**

**3. All will be okay in the end (15:20-23)**

**Perhaps the most difficult thing you will say to unbelievers is that unless you repent and believe that Jesus died for your sins, you will spend eternity under condemnation, separated from the blessings of God that are readily available to all who believe. In the great chapter on the resurrection, Paul makes it clear that the ones who are resurrected to eternal life are those who belong to Jesus.**

**Paul did not become all things to all people so that all would think him cool, nor to tell others that God is cool with you no matter what your state in life. We have the most wonderful message in the world and we have the most difficult message in the world. Most people in our land don't want to believe there is a consequence for not believing Jesus. I imagine if you took a poll of Americans and you asked, "Do you think everyone will enjoy good things in the next life?", the majority would say "Yes." Why risk the anger of others by saying that their eternal status depends on what they do with Jesus? Because our hearts have been stirred, like Paul's, and we say along with him in 1 Corinthians 9:16: "For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"**

**Paul varied the methods he used in presenting the gospel according to the people with whom he was witnessing so that they would hear the gospel. We have thought about what Paul was not saying in our text, and now it is time to consider what he was saying about sharing the gospel with the lost? First:**

- 1. God will meet people where they are – the gospel’s implications are broad enough that you can enter the conversation anywhere (1:26-31)**

**We all have the same basic physiological and psychological needs. In addition to basic needs of food and shelter, we all want to be loved, we all desire purpose, and we all need hope. Such needs are not based on racial, socio-economic, or political factors – we all need love. If you are devoid of such needs, most likely something happened somewhere in your life to dampen your hopes for a meaningful existence. Good news – God meets you where you are.**

**You are not required to advance to another level morally, intellectually, or socially to be saved. A theology of glory says that you need to climb up to God. A theology of the cross says that God came down to you and he meets you at the cross where the ground is level. That is why Paul desired to become all things to all people – because we are all in the same boat and everyone needs good news.**

**At the end of 1 Corinthians 1, Paul reminds the church members at Corinth that God delights in using those who may not be highly esteemed in the world’s eyes to accomplish his purposes. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, Paul is alluding to Jeremiah 9 where the Lord warned the wise not to trust in their wisdom, nor the wealthy in their riches, nor the powerful in their position. Why? Because it can all go away in a moment. I think deep down, we all know that. You may think you are not wealthy enough or smart enough or clever enough to witness to someone that God has put in your path,**



**but you have something the unbeliever doesn't have – assurance that all will be as it should be when the kingdom of God has fully come. You belong to Jesus! If the Spirit of God is in you, he will make himself known to others. That will create a thirst for God in some and it will make others angry with you because you have something they don't or because your message challenges their beliefs and actions. Do not weaken your testimony by watering down the gospel. Another point Paul was making to believers was:**

- 2. Our desire is not to be accepted by the world – the salvation of some is our purpose for evangelism (9:22-23)**

**I am sure that many of you have seen Schindler's List, the movie about Oskar Schindler who saved upwards of 1,200 Jews from the Nazis by employing them in his factory in Poland. Surely there are a few scenes that we would not recommend, but it is powerful depiction of historical events. At the end of the war, Schindler is shown weeping over the ones he could not save, but no one else faulted him for his failures. They were grateful for the ones who were saved from the gas chambers of the Nazis because he risked his life to save them. That is what Paul was saying about saving souls. Five times, by the way, in this text, Paul speaks of winning others. At the end he says his desire is to save some. He knew better than to think he could save people, but he used to word to show what was at stake – far more than was at stake in WWII.**

**As a follower of Christ, we are called to a holy lifestyle – not one that will likely appeal to the world. Even so, your loving care for those who don't know Christ is far more likely to yield fruit than any attempt to seek the world's favor by agreeing that God accepts people just as they are and everyone else should as well. It is true that God loves people as they are, but he does not accept people who refuse to agree with him about sin. Repentance indicates a turning from sin, and although we will all struggle with sin our entire lives,**

**we cannot be saved apart from acknowledging our sin. No matter how many clever arguments and beautiful artistic portrayals one can produce, God's word and the gospel will never change. Paul did not seek to win the approval of others, he sought the salvation of some. What did he tell those who would listen?**

**3. Hope is in the resurrection of the body – nothing in this world, good or bad, compares (9:23; 15:12-19, 42-58)**

**In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul gives a concise definition of the gospel and one of the first things you notice is that it is rooted in history. Paul said in verses 3-4, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.**

**Did you notice when we were quoting the Apostle's Creed that we were reciting history? The reason the Apostle's Creed was first developed was to clarify the church's understanding about the life and purpose of Jesus. There was mounting confusion about who Jesus was and what his life and ministry meant. Without a clear explanation of that, we really have nothing to offer. That is why we quote the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed from time to time.**

**The hope that is ours to offer others in the gospel is not that this life will be perfect or even better, but because of Jesus' sacrifice, we have the hope of resurrected bodies living eternally, worshiping our Creator and Savior, Jesus. In a day when scientists are, with a straight face, talking about immortality in these bodies, the gospel tells us what we already know – this world is broken beyond repair, but there is hope in the resurrection. We will close with the promise of the resurrection, made in 1 Corinthians 15: 42-43: “42 So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what**

**is raised is imperishable. 43 It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.”**

**That’s a good word. Let’s pray.**