

Giving Up to Gain

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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One of the most frequently quoted passages church marketing specialists use to justify “contextualizing” the gospel is Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 9, he summarizes his gospel strategy by claiming he became all things to all men. But look again at what Paul is actually saying in these verses:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it (1 Cor. 9:19–23).

The first sentence in that brief excerpt shows clearly what Paul was talking about. He was describing not his willingness to sacrifice the message, but his willingness to sacrifice himself to preach the message. He would give up everything—even become “a slave to all”—if that would promote the spread of the unadulterated gospel. His desire to win souls is the heart of this text, and he repeats it several times: “that I might win the more”; “that I might win Jews”; “that I might win those who are under the Law”; “that I might win those who are without law”; “that I might win the weak”; and “that I may by all means save some.” So winning people to Christ was his one objective. In order to do that, Paul was willing to give up all his rights and privileges, his position, his rank, his livelihood, his freedom—ultimately even his life. If it would further the spread of the gospel, Paul would claim no rights, make no demands, insist on no privileges.

And that is precisely how Paul lived and ministered. Not that he would modify the message to suit the world, but that he would behave so that he personally would never be an obstacle to anyone’s hearing and understanding the message of Christ. He was describing an attitude of personal sacrifice, not compromise. He would never alter the clear and confrontive call to repentance and faith.

Paul was making the point that Christian liberty must be circumscribed by love. That is the whole theme of the eighth through the tenth chapters of 1 Corinthians. It is the context in which these verses

are found. The Corinthians were evidently debating about the nature and extent of Christian freedom. Some wanted to use their liberty to do whatever they desired. Others leaned toward legalism, begrudging those who enjoyed their liberty in Christ. Paul was reminding both groups that Christian freedom is to be used to glorify God and serve others, not for selfish reasons.

Here's an example of how that principle applies. Some of the Corinthians apparently had asked Paul whether they were free to eat meat offered to idols (8:1). Such meat often was collected from the pagan temples and sold in the marketplace at bargain prices. Paul told them it is not inherently wrong to eat such food, but if doing so places a stumbling block in someone else's way, such an offense against another person is wrong. Paul summarized his reply with these words: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved" (10:31-33).

How did Paul use his own liberty in Christ? "Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more" (9:19). He saw his personal liberty and human rights as something to be used for God's glory, not his own enjoyment. If he could trade his own liberty for an opportunity to proclaim the gospel and thus liberate others, he would do it gladly.

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