

For the Weak I Became Weak

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:22–23

Code: B110920

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul models self-sacrificing love toward unbelievers. He explains his willingness to forfeit personal liberties and accommodate himself for the sake of the gospel. He's already mentioned two groups of people in the first section of this chapter—Jews and Gentiles. Paul was willing to forego his apostolic freedoms in order to reach both races. But racial application was only the beginning.

In verse 22, Paul mentions a third group: "To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak." Who are the weak? In Pauline theology this expression refers to overscrupulous Christians—immature believers who don't understand their liberty. In the Jewish community, for example, some new Christians still wanted to observe the Sabbaths, attend the synagogues, follow the dietary laws, and maintain all the feasts and ceremonies of the Old Testament law. Some in the Christian community had weak consciences and still felt such things were obligatory. They were just emerging out of Judaism and still holding on, feeling the pangs of conscience to do those things that had become habit and were associated with the true God and the Old Testament Scriptures.

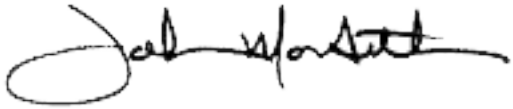
Among the Gentiles, on the other hand, there were those saved out of idolatry who now feared having anything to do with meat offered to idols. Perhaps some clung to old superstitions and feared demonic idols or simply wanted nothing to do with anything reminiscent of the former lifestyle.

Paul, of course, was free from such fears and superstitions. And he was free from the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. The law of Christ governed him. Although he felt free to do things that other people's consciences wouldn't allow them to do, when Paul was with weaker brethren he was careful not to violate their sensibilities. He adapted his behavior so as not to offend them. He yielded in love rather than offend a weaker brother.

How did he do that? At one point he took a Nazirite vow to quell a false rumor among the believing Jews in Jerusalem that he was preaching against Moses and urging Jewish people not to circumcise their children (Acts 21:17–26). Ironically, it was the carrying out of that vow that ultimately led to his arrest and imprisonment. The unbelieving Jews hated the message of the gospel, so they undertook to destroy the messenger. But they had no legitimate complaint against Paul personally, for he had gone out of his way to be a Jew for the Jews, a Gentile for the Gentiles, and a weak brother for the weak brethren.

Again the question comes, why did Paul subject himself to all that? First Corinthians 9:22, 23 says: "That I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel." "By all means" may sound at first like an echo of pragmatism, but don't forget, Paul is speaking here of condescension, not compromise. What is the difference? To condescend is to remove needless offenses to people's religious consciences by setting aside some personal, optional liberty. To compromise is to set aside an essential truth and thereby alter or weaken the gospel message.

Paul set himself in contrast with the compromisers and marketeers in 2 Corinthians 2:17: "We are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God." The compromiser sells a cheap gospel and tries to make it appealing by stripping away the offense of Christ. Paul simply wanted to keep himself from being an obstacle or a stumbling block to people's consciences so that the unadulterated message could penetrate hearts and do its work. If people were offended by the message, Paul did not try to remove the offense of the gospel or abolish the stumbling block of the cross, and he would not tolerate those who tried (Galatians 5:11). But he was willing to practice self-denial and deference if that opened opportunities for him to preach.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John W. Foster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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