



1 Corinthians 9:19-23 All Things to All People, Some Clarifications

January 19, 2014

Text: 1 Cor 9:19-23

- Welcome to an exposition of these marvelous verses! I simply love them!
- But, let me say that these verses have really been confused. Most likely because they are usually lifted from the larger context of 1 Corinthians chapters eight and nine.
- If you remember, the primary message of these chapters is given in 1 Cor 8:9: “But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”
- The Apostle is teaching the members of this young church a wonderful principle: that as they grow in knowledge that knowledge must be acted on through love (1 Cor 8:1).
- In other words, the higher goal of seeing new believers strengthened (instead of stumbling) can only be attained through love. The consequences are grave if this is not understood:

1Co 8:10-13 ESV For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? (11) And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. (12) Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. (13) Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

- In other words, Paul, in context, was encouraging A MORE STRAIGHT WALK...A MORE CONSERVATIVE APPROACH, A MORE BIBLICAL ETHIC throughout chapters eight and nine, NOT a more pragmatic ONE!
- I said last week that Paul’s goal for denying his own rights (1 Cor 9:1-18) was **integrity**: to display a straight, unencumbered path between his ministry and Christ’s gospel. He wanted there to be no doubt that his preaching was for the glory of Christ and for the sake of the people.
- Again, this focus on integrity shows that Paul’s motives were more GODLY not less; more HONORABLE not less, and CLOSER to Scripture and the heart of Christ, not less.
- I’m saying all of this at the outset because of how these Scriptures have been used--especially verses 22 and 23. But these admonitions from Paul should lead us to a more conservative, integrity-based interpretation with respect to doing ministry. Instead, many see these Scriptures as a biblical justification for pragmatism, and use them to essentially **do anything** they can dream up, “that by all means” some might be saved.
- To draw that conclusion is to ignore the context. Let’s dive in!

All Things to All People: Some Clarifications

For an excellent exposition on these verses, see John MacArthur’s book, Ashamed of the Gospel, chapter four.

1. First, let’s check the Apostle’s track record:
 - a. *Gal 1:6-12 ESV I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- (7) not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. (8) But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. (9) As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (10) **For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were***

- still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. (11) For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. (12) For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.***
- b. Ha! Paul was far from a **man**-pleaser! He taught against it and his life bears that out!
 - c. Paul wrote: *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...” (Ro 1:16).* When writing this letter as John MacArthur put it, Paul had been imprisoned in Philippi, chased out of Thessalonica, smuggled out of Berea, laughed at in Athens, regarded as a fool in Corinth, and stoned in Galatia!
 - d. In fact, he declared that the Gospel itself is a stumbling block! *“1Co 1:22-24 ESV For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, (23) but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, (24) but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*
2. *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. (1Co 9:19 ESV)*
- a. This verse, in addition to the larger context of chapters eight and nine, is key to understanding the “all things” principle.
 - b. Paul isn’t talking about compromising the message OR inventing some new strategy to please man and tickle his ears. He’s talking about sacrificing **himself**.
 - c. Giving up his rights, suffering, going without, being threatened, accused, beaten, homeless, snake-bitten, shipwrecked, carrying his cross and eventually, giving his life!
 - d. “He was describing an attitude of **personal** sacrifice, not compromise. He would never alter the clear and confrontive call to repentance and faith.” –John MacArthur
 - e. Friends, as Christians, we have tremendous liberty and freedom in Christ. Paul is describing an attitude of “voluntary servitude or slavery” that sacrifices **personal liberty** to advance the gospel.
 - f. He is in **no way** advocating a market driven, pragmatic approach to ministry; that’s not in the context at all! 😊
3. *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. (1Co 9:20 ESV)*
- a. The principle here is one of loving one who is weak. If Paul needed to abstain from a food in the presence of Jews, or observe a certain Jewish ritual in order to be able to preach, he did so. Even though he was free from those things, he laid down his own freedom for the Gospel. He would not, however, indulge in pagan worship to win pagans.
 - b. Akin to being mannerly in the house of a new acquaintance, Paul simply tried not to offend **unnecessarily**.
 - c. For clarification, Paul is not referring to the Moral Law (which still stands), but the ritualistic/ceremonial Law.
 - d. In one case, Paul circumcised Timothy in order to keep strict Jews from turning away from the Gospel before hearing it. That ain’t men pleasin’; that is self-sacrifice! (Acts 16:3)
 - e. Again, nothing in this verse says he tried to invent new ministry methods! He and his comrades simply died more to self as needed to communicate Christ’s message.
4. *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. (1Co 9:21 ESV)*

- a. First, a wonderful point here worth noting: Paul said he was under both the law of God and under the law of Christ! In other words, he remained under the Moral Law even as he walked in the law of love, which is the law of Christ (Matt 22:37-39; John 13:34-35 Gal 6:2; 1 John 4:21)!
 - b. It's not either/or; it is but/and. Christian liberty does away with ritual types and shadows not moral commandments rooted in God's **character**! No antinomianism here! ☺
 - c. Now to the point of the text. Those outside the law would be Gentiles...non-Jews.
 - d. When Paul ministered to Gentiles (most of his ministry), he would set any Jewish ceremonial traditions aside as necessary, as long as God's moral precepts and instructions on His worship wasn't compromised.
 - e. As an example, Paul ate with and fellowshiped with Gentiles in Antioch, which would have clashed with his strict Jewish upbringing.
 - f. One more time...nowhere do we see Paul inventing a man-made system of ministry. All we truly see is self-sacrifice.
5. *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. (1Co 9:22 ESV)*
- a. The "weak" here refers to Christian brothers and sisters who don't yet understand their liberty.
 - b. In these new churches, there were Jews who were weak in the Lord, and Gentiles who were weak in the Lord.
 - c. Paul was sensitive to both groups and desired to love them towards maturity.
 - d. "All things to all people by all means" at first glance and taken in isolation, sounds very pragmatic, but it isn't.
 - e. "He's referring to **condescension**, not compromise. 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." --John MacArthur
 - f. Remember when Paul likely took part in a Nazarite vow and paid the expenses of men who had taken that vow just to help shore up the faith of believing Jews? (Acts 21:17-26) Self purification, fasting, and certain temple time was required. Why did he go through all that?
6. *I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1Co 9:23 ESV)*
- a. He did it for the sake of the gospel. He wanted to see people born again and walking in Christ.
 - b. Paul preached the gospel in a straightforward manner, never tried to avoid the sting of the message, and certainly never tried to change the nature of the church to make others more comfortable. Re-read 1 Cor 5-6 if you doubt that!
 - c. Within the confines of **Scripture** is where he stayed, and it should be where we stay as well. Sola Scriptura is the safest, best, and commanded path:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.
(2Ti 3:16-17 ESV)

To sum up this whole teaching on loving the weak:

- 1. **Learn** as much as you can. Be a student of Scripture. Get knowledge! Get wisdom!

2. Allow **love** to help you process that knowledge. Be considerate for the conscience of a weak brother or sister.
3. Be willing to lay down personal rights and liberties for a much higher goal: the saved and sanctified soul of another.
4. Love hard! Love until it hurts! 😊
5. Never disobey a moral precept or move away from the prescribed message or prescribed worship in the process. Although it might be well-intentioned, that isn't love. The ends **DO NOT** justify the means. The world DOES NOT set the agenda for the church.

Amen.