

ADULT LESSON

By Anthony Richmond

MAIN TEXT

1 Corinthians 9:22

KEY POINT

Winning people to Christ requires significant personal sacrifice.

PICTURE IT INTRODUCTION

Texas is a football state. Friday night bright lights shining around football stadiums in the fall is part of the culture here. Two groups of intensely hormonal teenage boys clashing in battle provides our communities with a couple of hours of solace. It is a chance to forget about the cares of the world and cheer on “our boys.” As the community stands behind the players, the coaches of these teams attempt to get every ounce of energy and focus to manifest themselves at the right moments for their team to be victorious. We have seen the videos and heard the audio clips of those speeches coaches give their teams in the locker room before they take the field. These coaches motivate their boys to give all they have, leaving every ounce of effort and energy on that field. They rehearse the sacrifices that have been made for this moment—the early morning workouts in the weight room when all the other kids are still sleeping. The two-a-day practices in the heat of the Texas summer where resolve was tested. The late-night film and playbook sessions where assignments were drilled over and over. You can hear the coach: “These are the sacrifices that you made for this moment. This is our time. This is the culmination of all that we have worked to accomplish. We were made for this. Take this field and lay is all on the line for the sake of your brothers in this uniform and for the sake of our town.”

Personal sacrifice should also be a common occurrence in the life of every believer. Jesus stated in Mark 9:34, “If anyone wants to be My follower, he must deny himself.” Why would Jesus have to make this command in the first place? Because our natural inclination is to look after #1—me. As a result of our sinful nature, we do not have to try to indulge our own desires and pleasures; those indulgences come naturally. To live a life of personal sacrifice demands intense focus, constant reflection, and the power of the Holy Spirit to be active in our lives. Jesus identifies this struggle for his followers and commands a life of self-denial.

To what end is Jesus calling us to deny ourselves? A glance back in church history reveals groups of people who believed that the mortification of their bodies would help ensure the salvation of their souls, an obvious misinterpretation of Jesus’ command and call to discipleship. Paul gives a helpful interpretation and application in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Let’s look at this passage together as we seek to be on the Lord’s mission and to Reach Texas.

PRAY

BIBLE IT BIBLE STUDY

Read the passage 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

¹⁹ Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win those under the law. ²¹ To those who are without the law, like one without the law—though I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ—to win those without the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. ²³ Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.

1. Observe the text. (Ask learners to identify phrases and repeated words):

- Who is speaking? The Apostle Paul
- Who is his audience? Corinthian believers
- How many times do we see the phrases, "I am," "I have made myself" or "I became?" 8
- How many times do we see the phrases, "In order to," or "to win?" 6 times
- What connection is there between the former phrases and the latter phrases? The former phrases say, "Here's what I do," and the latter phrases add, "in order to get this result."
- What different groups of people are named? More people, those under the Law, ones without the Law, the weak, all people.

Say to the class: By observing the text, we can be clued into the message that Paul intends to communicate.

Ask: Why do you think words are so important when we study the Bible? Why is it important for us to make sure that we understand the message that Paul intends to communicate? What is the historical and literary context in which Paul makes these statements?

2. Interpret the Text "What is its meaning?"

Winning people to Christ is Paul's point. It is clear from the repetition:

- vs. 19, "That I might win more."
- vs. 20, "That I might win the Jews."
- vs. 21, "That I might win them that are without the law."
- vs. 22, "That I might win the weak."

The clear principle that we find in this passage is this: Our desire to see people impacted with the truth of the gospel trumps our personal liberty. Mature believers are quick to sacrifice personal freedom for the sake of gospel advancement.

A. Winning people to Christ requires service.

"Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people."

In verse 19, Paul clearly states that he would sacrifice personal liberty and become a person's slave to win them to Christ. Paul is echoing the words of Jesus in Mark 10:44: "Whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to all." The word "slave" for Paul was a very strong word. It was used to describe the service and bond in marriage. It was used to speak of our union and bond with Christ. Paul is using strong language to illustrate just how far we should go to win people with the gospel.

For Paul, this was not theoretical language existing in a perfect case scenario but the reality of his life. He states that he has made himself a slave to all kinds of people. Paul was so motivated for gospel advancement that he sought to understand how he could serve his audience. Serving some meant not eating certain foods sacrificed to idols. For others it was being involved in ceremonies and customs. These sacrifices to serve and win others were not slavery that acted as a ball and chain, nor were they drudgery for Paul. It was his joy to put himself in the position of a slave by serving others and sacrificing self.

B. Winning people to Christ involves accommodation.

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win those under the law.”

In verse 20, Paul illustrates how this service looked in his life. He speaks of accommodations he made. Please note, Paul is not referring to making lost people as comfortable as possible by any means necessary. Paul is not seeking to behave like a lost person to reach lost people. Instead, the focus is on what Paul needed to become.

Please look at Acts 15:19-20. James responds to the Jerusalem Council where the decision was made that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish to be saved. However, there were four areas Gentiles were to abstain from so they would not be overtly offensive to the Jews. It is a simple request of self-denial and self-control for a greater good. Some accommodations are necessary to have open lines of communication. Clearly, Paul is not speaking of things that are overtly right or wrong. He is not making the case for engaging in sinful activity “for the sake of winning someone to Christ.” He is speaking of the gray areas of Christian liberty, decisions that we can make that are not either right or wrong. In those things, Paul is teaching us that winning a person to Christ is worth any personal accommodation.

“To those who are without the law, like one without the law—though I am not without God’s law but under the law of Christ—to win those without the law.”

Paul continues the illustration in verse 21. Paul makes it clear that he is not speaking of violating the law of God to win people to Christ. Instead, Paul was willing to lay down the ceremonial customs when he was with Gentiles. In Galatians 2, Paul opposes Peter for being fearful about how the Jews would view Peter for eating with the Gentiles (and laying aside Jewish ceremonial laws). Paul challenges Peter to make these personal accommodations for the sake of the gospel growth in the Gentiles.

“To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak.”

Paul illustrates this willingness to make accommodations for gospel advancement for “the weak.” In Paul’s writings, “the weak” are typically a group of believers who are new Christians or immature in their faith. In a sense, these are baby Christians who are still dependent upon the simple and fundamental milk truths of Christianity. They are still getting their legs under them about what it means to be a disciple of Christ. For those coming out of Judaism, this would be evident in their desire to continue keeping the Sabbath or being involved in temple sacrifices and ceremonies. For Gentiles, they would want nothing to do with anything associated with idols or what they considered pagan activities, even if not inherently wrong. Put simply, Paul’s goal motivated his personal decisions and liberties. He was so concerned with winning more souls to Christ and gaining people for the kingdom that he sacrificed any other gain, including personal preference or liberty.

C. Winning people to Christ is motivated by the power of the gospel.

“I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.”

The end of verse 22 summarizes the truth of Paul's willingness to serve and accommodate personal preference for the sake of others. In verse 23, Paul clearly lays out his motivation: "I do all of this because of the gospel." Winning people to Christ involves paying close attention to our motivations. Paul is telling us that he makes all these concessions and takes the position of slave to others because the gospel is worth it. Paul had personal experience with the power of the gospel. He knew the transformative power of God that resides in the gospel when the Spirit of God saves. He had a testimony of that power in his own soul (see Galatians 1:13-17). Not only that but God used Paul to share the gospel with many Gentiles in unreached parts of the world. Paul witnessed the transformative power of the gospel manifested in pagan people. For Paul, the truth that the gospel is "God's power for salvation for everyone who believes" motivated his entire life. Paul really believed it, and his life's goals and personal sacrifices reflected his belief. Paul had one thought. He had a one-track motivation: He desired to co-share the blessing of the power of God in salvation for everyone who would receive it.

We must be clear on the distinction between personal sacrifice and personal compromise. While personal sacrifice involves laying aside a preference or optional liberty, personal compromise involves laying aside truth. Paul clearly states in other contexts that he is not motivated by pleasing people. In Galatians 1:10, Paul chronicles his motivation: "For am I now trying to win favor of people, or God? Or am I striving to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ." Paul is clear that he will not forsake the truth of the gospel to please the ears of men. However, if any man is offended by some behavior that Paul is doing that isn't necessary, he will lay that behavior aside for the sake of gospel advancement.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS WHAT IS EVANGELISM?

True evangelism is the initial step in the process of fulfilling the Great Commission. It involves a disciple of Jesus sharing the message of the gospel with a lost sinner. Jesus gives his disciples the mandate in Matthew 28:19—"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This is the heart of the mission for followers of Christ. The process of making disciples begins with sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with those who are not disciples of Jesus. Paul describes evangelism as winning people to Christ. As lost sinners respond in saving faith to the gospel message, they enter into the church through baptism and are disciplined by the church through sound teaching. Believers in the early church were known for their passionate gospel preaching and zeal for making disciples. Throughout the book of Acts, the apostles and other disciples are accused of "turning the world upside down" through their evangelistic passion and zeal (Acts 17:6). Evangelism is the responsibility of every disciple of Christ. It is not reserved for pastoral leaders or for those who have received specialized training. In 1 Peter 3:15, we receive this command: "Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."

LIVE IT APPLICATION

Tell your class that you would like them to rank the items listed below in order of the one they are "most likely to do," ending with the one they are "least likely to do." (Consider writing these on a board or preparing a sheet of paper to hand out with these options for each participant.)

The options are as follows:

- "I am most likely to drop everything and help someone in need."
- "I am most likely to overlook someone doing wrong towards me."
- "I am most likely to follow the rules in a given circumstance."
- "I am most likely to be focused on the task at hand, to do it well and on time."

After giving the participants a few minutes to formulate their response, ask them to identify the one option that is “most like” them. Explain that each option is not inherently good or bad, but each have their strengths and weaknesses. Outline the strengths and weaknesses below for each group.

“I am most likely to drop everything and help someone in need.”

Strength: Compassion/Service—Just as Paul was prepared to be a slave to others in order to share the gospel message, we are to constantly be ready to serve others and present the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Weakness: There is always someone in need. Opportunities to serve others are constantly in our view. Sometimes the thought of trying to serve everyone is so overwhelming that we fail to actually invest time in a specific person, to know them and minister to them deeply. We can be spread so thin that we fail to “make disciples” in our haste to serve the greatest number of people.

“I am most likely to overlook someone doing wrong towards me.”

Strength: Forgiveness—Jesus was forgiving and taught us to be forgiving: “Forgive those who trespass against us.” Relationships with people are important in the process of making disciples. Just as Paul was willing to lay aside personal preferences or feelings to maintain a gospel witness, we are to sacrifice in the same way.

Weakness: We may struggle to hold people accountable to personal holiness or to stand firm in true doctrine because we fear the relationship will be damaged. We must remember that the point is not to have the largest number of relationships possible, but to maintain a gospel witness. Failure to uphold God’s standard of doctrinal truth or Christ-like living for the sake of maintaining a relationship is wrong.

“I am most likely to follow the rules in a given circumstance.”

Strength: Obedience—Paul was obedient and taught us to be obedient to the commands of Christ. It is important for us to take the commands of Jesus and live them out through the power of the Spirit. We are commanded to preach the gospel. We are mandated to go and make disciples. We must be obedient to this call.

Weakness: The Pharisees were good at following the rules, but they failed to see the heart of the law. They failed to see that God is not concerned with cold-hearted obedience to the letter of the command but a true love for him and for others. Sharing the gospel message or seeking to win people to Christ is not a personal achievement ribbon to be worn by those who do it. Sharing the gospel must be motivated out of a real love for God and others rather than being a check mark on a to-do list. Reaching others should flow from a deep and intimate relationship with God and a real desire to see others profess Jesus as their Savior and Lord for his glory.

“I am most likely to be focused on the task at hand, to do it well and on time.”

Strength: Task-oriented. Getting things done is necessary. It is important that we not be distracted, and at times we must “put our head down” and simply get things done. Gospel witnessing is a work that every true disciple of Christ should be committed to doing. We are to go about our lives spreading the seed of the gospel on as much ground as possible.

Weakness: Many times in the process of completing a task, we overlook opportunities to minister or develop relationships with others. At the end of the day, Jesus is not concerned with how much we accomplish. Obedience in evangelism is not measured by who gives the most gospel presentations. It is not that simple. Obedience is measured by a heart motivated to seek the glory of God and personal sacrifice for the sake of gospel witness. Paul’s goal was not about the ministry itself. He was focused on the souls of people and the glory of Christ.

Ask your students to reflect on these things to see what may come the most naturally for them. Encourage them to consider how their weaknesses may impact their motivations and behaviors in winning people to Christ and reaching Texas.

CLOSING PRAYER