



As we entered into chapter 9 last week, Paul gives a defense for why he wants to live sacrificially for other’s good in the gospel. He’d rather die than live on the basis of his rights! He wants to live freely in the gospel. Then, in verse 19, we read, “¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.”¹

Have you ever heard of an oxymoron? It means two words that are completely opposite, but communicate something real. Like, “jumbo shrimp.” That’s an oxymoron. Verse 19 has a statement that sounds like an oxymoron, too. Paul says he’s free and has made himself a servant. This word for “servant” is actually the word for being enslaved. How is one an enslaved free person? That makes no sense! Yet, Paul is going to explain what he means here. As free people, we are to choose to enslave ourselves to others *for the sake* of the gospel. That’s why the title of this sermon is “Free to be a Servant of the Gospel.” In case you’re starting to resist this message right now, let’s again remind ourselves of the gospel itself. In Philippians 2, Paul uses similar wording. He’s urging the Philippian Christians to live as servants of the gospel and he says, “⁵ **Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a [slave], being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him. . . .**”² What did Jesus do for you and me? He, who was and is free, took on the form of a slave. Jesus himself said the greatest must be the servant of all. Paul says in Philippians here that he enslaved himself to this broken sinful world. He became a part of it. He endured the pain and rejection. He then went further than any other human being, and he endured and satisfied the just punishment that sinners like you and I deserve. Because of Jesus anyone (including you and me) can go to Jesus for full forgiveness of all our sins and be forgiven! Because of what Jesus has done, Paul says that God has highly exalted Jesus because of this. This is God’s assessment. The question for us is, “What assessment do we live for?” Do we align with what God finds glorious or do you align with what you and others think is best? *Have this mind, the mind of a slave for other’s good in the gospel.*

But again, you say, “This doesn’t sound freeing, though? I thought freedom was being able to do whatever you want?!” Paul’s going to explain more of this as we move further in the text, but let me ask a simple question, “Do you ever enjoy what you love doing?” Of course! If you love shooting guns, can you imagine having all the ammo paid for you, all the cool guns at your fingertips? You’d probably say, “Now that’s a vacation! That’s freedom!” What if you loved playing an instrument, and I said, “You will have uninterrupted time playing your instrument for hours a day.” You might say, “Finally! I haven’t had that in so long.” A concert pianist doesn’t complain about sacrificing things in order to play the piano. And, believe me, they are sacrificing things while they’re playing hours a day. A person who shoots guns hours a day is sacrificing things, but they don’t believe they are because of their love.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:19.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 2:5–9.

I think this is what Paul is getting across here, too. He rejoices in the gospel of Jesus. He loves the Lord. So, he uses verbiage of sacrifice because we sacrifice for whatever we love. But, if we love, then those sacrifices pale in comparison to the joy. Now clearly, the Corinthians aren't rejoicing in the Lord. They're not enjoying him. So, Paul is challenging them to see where they may have derailed in their love for the Lord. And, maybe this chapter is evaluating you, too. If you are not longing to sacrifice your freedom and rights for the souls of others, you've forgotten the gospel of Jesus. Or, maybe you haven't believed on it at all.

With this backdrop then, I think we can move to the main idea of these verses: **Christians are free to share in the gospel with others.** In these verses, this is what it means to be a servant of the gospel, but I'll explain more as we move forward. I'm breaking up this section into two points (which are the two paragraphs). These sections simply show us the "what" and the "why" for this kind of living. So, let's jump into the first point:

1. What does it look like to share in the gospel with others? (vv. 19-23)

The answer is: **Sacrificial Service.** This is not a "Oh, I have to" kind of thing. To Paul this is a "Oh, we get to!" Why? Because the gospel is so glorious! So, let's read verses 19-23 again: ¹⁹For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰To 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. ²¹To 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. ²²To 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. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. ³

Why does Paul enslave himself to all – even though he's free in the gospel? He says, "that I might win more of them." FYI – keep in mind that verse 19 begins with "For." That means that what he's saying here connects with what he said previously about rights. He lays down his rights, even though he's free. Why? Because that's the only way that we can rightly proclaim the gospel to others. This applies to all of us. If you aren't known for laying down your rights for others and sacrificing your freedoms for the good of others, you aren't proclaiming the gospel faithfully through your life.

I remember having a conversation with someone a while back, asking them if the way they spoke and acted would be different if they were a missionary in a different country. I've wondered that myself, and my natural tendency is to say, "Well, that's different. This is my home." But then I'm reminded of the apostles telling us that this world is *not* our home. We are strangers and exiles in this present world. Therefore, if my attitude was different in a different country than here, I'm not really understanding the stewardship God has given me in this world. You and I have been given the precious, glorious, greatest good news. Will we proclaim it in our words and actions – words and actions that reveal sacrifice? Do you care about the souls of people who are on a path of dying and going to a Godless eternity? Do you have a burden for them or are you more annoyed or frustrated or angered at how different they are from you and how they may be infringing on your rights and freedoms? Think about this! In the USA where many rights and freedoms are granted, we can often get stuck thinking only from this world's and this government's perspective, forgetting that we are citizens of a greater Kingdom. I've wondered how

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:19–23.

many have truly forgotten Jesus' victory. I recently heard someone say that the future of Christianity in America may hinge on the next President. And it seems their argument is made on the basis of whether or not Christians will have their rights and freedoms. When I heard this, I was angered because the reality is that if the gates of Hell cannot prevail against the gospel, not President, King, Ruler of any kind will kill the gospel. Jesus has conquered death and reigns over all. And, even if our freedoms are taken away, it won't kill Christianity because we were to live by sacrificing our personal freedoms and rights.

I hope you desire to reveal the beauty of the gospel in your words and actions. And, if you're still struggling with this laying down of rights, let's continue to move through these verses. Paul shows us practically what he means by being enslaved to the people of this world. Basically, he breaks up the world into two people groups: Jew and Gentile. Then he puts them all together in the end. He says that to the Jews, he became a Jew. Then "to those under the law," which is referring to Jews as well. He explains that he "became as one under the law." I believe each of these phrases refer to the Jews. Then in verse 21, he refers to "those outside the law" and he says that he became as those outside the law.

After each statement, he explains why. So, if you mark in your Bibles, it might be helpful to underline the phrase, "win those. . . ." Now, some people in our day might be offended by this phrase. It can sound to them like Imperialism and also forcing people to come to your position. But Paul wasn't trying to force anyone to his position. Jesus taught us that we cannot force anyone to believe, and we are to love our enemies! But to "win" them refers to them being drawn to the gospel through our demeanor. Through Paul's sacrificial serving, he hopes to see people won over by this love. He safely assumes that this will lead to people's salvation – and we should assume this as well. After all, we were won to Jesus because of his sacrificial love – and more than likely even watching others display that while they shared with us the gospel.

The goal is that others might know the One of greatest value – God himself through Jesus by the power of the Spirit. If you long for people to know God then Paul says you'll "become" like anyone. What does this mean? Some want to state that Paul is saying here to be a chameleon and simply embrace anything in the culture. They may go as far as to say you can silence certain teachings of Scripture because they're offensive – as long as you talk about Jesus. But from the beginning of 1 Corinthians, Paul has stated that the gospel is offensive and foolishness to the world. What I think Paul is getting at here is at least two things: **1) You shouldn't be offensive, 2) You can find common ground with unbelievers, and 3) Find how one's society might point to the greater answer in Christ.**

First, you don't need to be offensive. Honestly, I've had conversations with people who are not Christians who state that they shut themselves off from Christians because of *how* Christians talk. They're argumentative. They call people idiots for believing certain things. They mock and look down. And, while I do want them to know that's not all Christians, I've also been grieved when I've scrolled various social media platforms. Christians do act this way. Ventura, do you realize who's watching you? In the previous section of chapter 9, and in this section, Paul himself doesn't want to add a reason for someone to deny Jesus. Instead, he wants to highlight the gospel through his own actions, laying down his freedoms as a privilege.

The second point is to find common ground with unbelievers. Where do I get that? In the ESV, we read that to the Jews "I became as a Jew," the literal Greek is to the Jews "as a Jew." I think this means that he seeks for some type of common ground. Clearly he doesn't embrace all practices of the Jewish or Greek cultures because of his parenthetical statements. He says he's not truly under the law, and he adds for the Greek culture that he's not apart from the law of God. Instead, he's under the law of Christ.

What does this mean? He lives in line with the gospel of Jesus. He lives on the basis of love for God and others. And, if you wonder what this looks like, read Matthew 5-7. A heart shaped by the Lord transforms us from the inside-out. Paul lives on the basis of Jesus. That doesn't mean he's lawless with the Gentiles. That doesn't mean that he obeys all the Judaic laws like the Jews in his day were doing. But instead, if there were ways he could find common ground he would. One commentator I read actually stated that Paul went to great degrees in order to maintain common ground with the Jews. How many times did he experience a lashing of 39? Five times! In the ancient Jewish teaching, called the Mishnah, it states that the "one who is scourged is thy brother" (*m. Mak. 3:15* as quot. in Garland). Instead of leaving the Jews behind and simply saying he was a follower of the Way, he submitted to the discipline of the Jewish society. He didn't have to, but he chose to. What a beautiful picture of the gospel, right? By Jesus' stripes we are healed. Paul was an example of extreme love and sacrifice for others. This just makes me ask myself a question. In the midst of the last few months, how have I displayed the gospel of Jesus to the unbelievers who I think may be working against me? Do I show this sacrificial love? Lord, please help us!

Paul also adds that to the Greeks and those outside the law, he found common ground with them. There were scenarios where he behaved and acted like the Gentiles. He was personally ok with certain customs in their culture that the Jews would have been against because Jesus had abolished certain blood rules through his sacrificial death! This leads to the third point. Whether one was a Jew or a Gentile, there were certain things in their societies that Paul could pick up from in order to point to Christ – whether the Jews and the law or the Gentiles who lived apart from the law and yet worshipped in so many ways. Read Acts and other letters of Paul to see how he picked up off of their culture. So with us, Ventura. Do you know the culture around you? Do you know Holland? Do you know Michigan? What about America? How can we best relate in order to show that Jesus is superior? I fear most of us may only know Christianese – the language of Christians. But we don't know how to translate that to the people around us.

Finally, in verse 22, we read, "To the weak, I became weak." I think this word for weak is referring to the acknowledgement of his sinfulness. In Romans 5:6, Paul writes that when we were still weak, Christ died for the ungodly. "Weak" there refers to our utter need for Christ. Now, Paul is not an unbeliever, but he can definitely relate – and he should never forget his state before salvation. Nor should we! Apart from the grace of God, we would be in a place called Hell. A place where we are forever bound by our sins and our brokenness, in torment from within and experiencing just punishment for our rebellion. But God, who was rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us in Christ, saved us! This message coursed through Paul's veins.

In your witness to the world, are you offensive? Do you seek to find common ground with people? One of the hindrances to finding common ground, I think, is our tendency to create categories for people. This person is a republican, democrat, liberal, conservative, rich, poor, educated, non-educated. And, depending on who you are, you have a view of what these words means. So, someone can say "liberal," and you may also associate the word "enemy" or "sinful and bad person." But when you say "sinful" person, you don't have a compassion for them. You want to work against them. We can do this in many arenas. We can also do this by putting people into "safe" categories. If someone is "conservative," they're basically a Christian. Is that true? No! Jesus said we are to love our enemies. And when the Pharisees, the moral ones, tried to emphasize their differences from the sinners and tax collectors, didn't Jesus emphasize to them that they were sinners, too, in need of the mercy and grace of God? Yes, he did. And so, with Paul, in his efforts, he lived on the reality that he was a human, like them, created in the image of God, in need of mercy and grace. And he would sacrifice to the Nth degree so that others

might be won to the Savior who changes lives! And, again, Paul is writing all of this in order to urge the Corinthians to the same mindset. Oh that we Christians would all take up our gospel stewardship and know our freedom to serve the gospel! It's not just the Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's who are to lovingly proclaim. It's not just the Paul's and Peter's of the world. It's you and me!

May we have the mantra of Paul in verse 22: **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.** ⁴ Again, if you mark in your Bibles, circle the words "all" and "some." All things to all people by all means. He doesn't say, "By all means, as long as I don't have to sacrifice my rights and freedoms." No! The whole argument is about sacrificing personal rights and personal freedoms. Why? To see *some* saved. To see *some* rescued from Hell and reconciled to God! Therefore, in verse 23, he says that he does all of this for the gospel's sake. So the gospel will be prized. Then he adds an interesting note: that I may share with them in its blessings. Our joy is made more full when someone else experiences what we love and then loves it as well. I love steak. If I have a good steak, I want to share it with someone else. If they love it in turn, for some reason it causes my joy to increase. That's just food that passes through my system! What about the good news of Jesus that promises eternity with God, the One who is the Creator of all blessings and the Fountain of our eternal nourishment and hope?! Paul doesn't just want people to know about the gospel, he wants to rejoice with them in it.

Ventura, we ought to think this way about people around us. The people we think are enemies and the people who are friends but also unbelievers. Don't you want to share in gospel joy with them? Do you want that? This was what urged Paul, and it reminds me of what a man named John Piper once said, "**Missions exists because worship doesn't.**" Many of us here have been set free to glory in God's glory, to worship him! What a wonderful freedom. But so many people are bound to glory in lesser things. Maybe that's you today, and I hope that you would cry out to Jesus today for forgiveness. Simply pray to him now for forgiveness. His sacrifice covers all sins! But there are so many who don't worship God. That thought should fill us with a burden to want them to rejoice, too. They're turning to sins because they're sinners. What would happen if Jesus set them free? Tell them the gospel through your words, and let your actions affirm that glorious gospel! So, in these five verses, Paul told us what it looked like to share in the gospel with others: sacrificial service. In these final four verses, he gives us an illustration to encourage those of us who would say, "How do we do this?"

2. How do we share in the gospel with others? (vv. 24-27)

The answer is: **Disciplined Service.** Paul gives a straightforward illustration. Let's read verses 24-26: ²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ⁵

here we see how Paul was relating to the Corinthian culture because Corinth the Isthmian games, which would also host many competitors of the Olympics. In addition, these Greek games also brought together religious worship and even food offered to idols. So we have a perfect illustration for the Corinthians.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:22–23.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:24–26.

One ancient writer wrote that Olympians and their trainers would swear that they would not sin against the Olympian games, and they would take a further oath to adhere to strict 10-month training regulations. One second century Christian named Tertullian wrote of the athletes that they “are set apart for more rigid training to apply themselves to the building up of their physical strength. They are kept from lavish living, from more tempting dishes, from more pleasurable drinks. They are urged on, they are subjected to tortuous toils, they are worn out. The more strenuously they have exerted themselves, the greater is their hope of victory” (see Garland, pp. 440-41).

Apply this to what Paul’s saying. Within the Christian faith, we can all win in Christ – and therefore, let’s run like the winners we are in Christ! But don’t only run, implement your training. Every athlete has self-control in all things. And this is what Paul’s been saying to the Corinthians about denying rights and freedoms. That’s just self-control. But what do runners and boxers get? They get a perishable wreath. Yet that wreath communicates a lot. This year was supposed to be another Olympic year, and I love watching those Olympics. We have respect for those people who get the Gold, Silver and Bronze. But what did they really gain? They gained human approval. Human awe. That’s it. And when they die, that medal might be passed to a family member who will die as well. The acclaim doesn’t give you life – yet we can live as though that’s the point of life. And, the Olympians and athletes in Corinth live as though that’s all to live.

Then when Paul calls the Corinthians to a greater self-control – to sacrificial living for other’s joy in the gospel, they say, “That makes no sense.” And Paul says, “No, sacrificing all for a perishable wreath makes no sense.” But again, he picks up on the culture to point to a greater reality – sacrificing for Christ and the gospel is the greatest privilege because in this we don’t simply hear human approval. Some may rejoice in the gospel. But ultimately, we are living for God’s glory and praise. And we will hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” In addition, we aren’t simply receiving a perishable wreath. Instead, there are souls that will live on in Heaven forever with the Lord through this type of disciplined self-control! It’s interesting to me how this passage has often been used to speak of how we should discipline ourselves for all areas of godliness, but this passage is specifically talking about how we ought to discipline our lives for the sake of proclaiming the gospel to the world around us! The reward to come is greater than a dying plant on my head. The reward to come is God’s embrace and many people sharing in God’s glory together!

Paul then concludes this paragraph with a sobering statement in verse 27: ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. ⁶ He is disciplined in all things for the gospel’s sake. And then he says “lest after preaching to other I myself should be disqualified.” You can know all the information. You can know the gospel. You can speak the gospel, but if your life is not transformed by the gospel to lead you to sacrificial love for others – laying down your rights and freedoms, Paul says we could be disqualified. Now, we have another question. Is Paul saying he’ll lose his salvation? No. The word for disqualified is actually the word for “counterfeit.” You can write to the side, “lest I be proven false/counterfeit.”

Ventura, I pray none of you are faking it. I pray you don’t just know the message but you don’t live it. And, I pray that as you hear these words, if God is pressing your heart to turn to him because you’ve been hardened towards others, I pray you’d repent! If you don’t, you’re like a runner who says, “Well, I’m here at the meet, but I don’t *have* to run.” If that’s your attitude, you’re not a runner. In a similar

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 9:27.

way with a Christian. If you hear these words, I pray they resonate with you and you will respond by saying, “I get to display Jesus through my words and actions to the world!”

So, how are you going to respond? What are sins that God is revealing? How do you speak towards the world? About the world? Do you have a burden for their souls and a burden to share in the gospel with them? Take a few moments to think and pray and then we will conclude our time together in prayer, singing and a benediction.

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