

1Corinthians 9:20-23 "Making the Most of Every Opportunity"

As we come to our text this morning Paul is going to sum up what his motivation and desire is for giving up certain rights he has in Christ so that he might be a more effective witness for the Lord with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Remember, this entire chapter has been instruction for these Corinthian believers to consider what their real work in the kingdom of God is all about. Nothing should get in the way of that work, especially our own selfish motives. But even if they're not selfish motives we should still consider the good we might accomplish by giving up certain rights. This is what Paul pointed out earlier in this chapter.

1CO 9:12 "If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ."

And so, as we move forward in our text Paul now puts into perspective what it is that goes through his mind and heart as he considers the work of reaching the world for Christ with the gospel.

In his day the world was divided up into two basic groups: those who were Jews and those were Gentiles; those who were of the Mosaic law and those who weren't. And Paul was willing to reach them both by coming along-side them with compassion and empathy and an understanding of where they stood.

He considered their cultural background, their customs, their perspective on life as unbelievers and so on. He didn't have one "pat" approach to all people. Again, Paul was not concerned with simply giving the gospel as though there were only one script. Paul approached life with many scripts, but only one story line.

The message of the gospel has remained the same, but people are different in many ways. And so, to think that all people should be approached in exactly the same way might very well close the door to sharing with some about who Jesus Christ is and what He did to secure our salvation. And Paul wouldn't think of doing that.

Here's a guy who was brought up a Jew and then went on to school to become a Pharisee. He was a leader in the Jewish community

and viewed life as a Jew. But he was also brought up in a Gentile world being a Roman citizen. And this understanding would serve him well after he came to faith in Christ.

As a Pharisee his attitude was not to mingle with the unclean Gentiles. But now in Christ he was compelled to not only mingle with them, but to love them and go to them out of that love and the compulsion he felt as one who was bought at a price and given so great a gift that he declared, "woe to me if I don't preach the gospel."

By that very statement he also means to suggest, "woe to me if I don't go to the Gentiles with the gospel." "Woe to me if I don't reach out to a hostile Jewish community with the Messiah they reject."

So, how do you go about doing that? How do you go about reaching out to Jews and Gentiles, all the while understanding the differences between their world views and their religious backgrounds?

1CO 9:20 "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law."

What does he mean by this? Well, it's not as though Paul had to become like a Jew to win the Jews. He was already a Jew. He's not simply talking about nationality. He's talking about religious convictions which are all tied up in that community of people.

This is why he adds the phrase, "to those under the law I became like one under the law." So, is Paul now playing games with people? Is he just some actor pretending to be like them to trick them into a hearing of the gospel? Not at all.

He simply means to suggest that he will not go out of his way to offend them by not understanding them and using that understanding to at least earn a hearing from them. Does this mean he compromised his faith simply to get a chance to share the gospel?

No. This would be counter-productive to the gospel in the long run. You don't earn the trust of people by being deceptive. Paul could still be a Christian and promote the truth of Christ while moving in Jewish circles as he humbled himself to come alongside them.

In fact, what is it we read of Paul when he came into a new town? In almost every place he went he first entered into the Synagogues. He most certainly announced himself as a Jew and as a former Pharisee. But there was no pretension as to what was there for. He was there to announce the fulfillment of the O.T. Scriptures by declaring that Jesus Christ was the Messiah who was promised.

Now, at that point many Jews took offense. But they didn't take offense from Paul because he was pretending to be something he was not. He never pretended to be a Jew whose hope was in the law, and yet he could use the law as a means of letting the Jews know that he wasn't opposed to the God who gave them the law. He respected them in that way.

In fact, on one occasion Paul took Timothy with him to reach out to the Jews. But knowing the Jews would not even consider dining and fellowshiping with one who was uncircumcised, Paul had Timothy circumcised.

ACT 16:3 "Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek."

Of course, they also knew his mother was a Jew. And in having Timothy circumcised Paul was making it clear that Timothy honored his Jewish heritage. In doing this he honored these Jews and honored God through obedience to the law as they perceived it.

Did Timothy have the right in Christ to stay uncircumcised? Sure. But he gave up that right to reach the lost Jews. There were actually times where Paul would keep certain aspects of the law to come alongside fellow Jews with the gospel.

Once, when he came to Jerusalem to meet with James and the elders, he gave a report of how the Lord was bringing many Gentiles to Christ. But, when he got to Jerusalem he was told by the elders that many Jews, who had professed Christ, had mistakenly heard that Paul was commanding Jews, who lived among Gentiles, to forsake anything that had to do with Moses.

Their counsel to Paul was to demonstrate, in a substantial way, how he still believed the law of Moses was something given by God and to be honored among Jews. This is what they told Paul about the Jews in that area.

ACT 21:21-24 "They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. 22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, 23 so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. 24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law."

Paul could have said, no way. I'm not subject to the law. Instead, he sees an opportunity to advance the cause of Christ and to allow those laboring in the fields around Jerusalem not to be at a disadvantage when it came to bringing those Jews the gospel because of something he did or didn't do, as the Jews perceived it.

This again, doesn't mean that Paul compromised the message of the gospel. It simply means that he didn't shut the door in being able to share the gospel. My family is still very much involved in the Roman Catholic church. I was brought up Roman Catholic.

They know where I stand on the gospel and the truth of God's word and how I cannot reconcile Rome's approach to salvation. But, there have been many occasions where I had to attend some special event in their lives where their attendance at Mass was involved.

It may have been a wedding or a funeral. And in each of those cases I attended Mass with them. They knew I wouldn't participate in their sacrifice of the Mass, and they knew why. But, in honoring the moment of their joy or grief by being there with them, I was able to keep the lines of communication open to possibly share the gospel with them once again in the future.

To be so rigid as to be unavailable to people because of their customs or religious convictions, is to miss many opportunities to reach these people with the very thing they need. Again, there will be times when we will have to weigh the advantages with the disadvantages. To participate in certain of their customs may also be a bad testimony.

The point is each case may be different, but let's not think ourselves to have been set apart from the world to be separate from them. Even Christ lived and moved among sinners without

participating in their sin, so that He might show them and tell them of the kingdom of God.

That's what this whole section is about.

1CO 9:20-23 "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

This last part is really what sums up Paul's incentive in reaching people where they were.

"I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

Paul had a passion for people as his passion and love for Christ was the very thing that caused him to reach out to everyone with the gospel. He knew that these people were lost in their sin and he knew where that would take them; eternal separation from God. That was too much for Paul to bear when he knew he had the life giving message of hope.

But, he also knew that everyone is different and that we should approach each individual as an individual not with some cookie cutter approach. This is what Paul told the Colossians.

COL 4:5 "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

For Paul to reach the Jews there were times when he humbled himself and partook in the customs of the Jews so that he might win some to Christ. And he did. The Lord was gracious in using Paul's servant attitude as he desired to take them the gospel.

The same was true when he reached out to the Gentiles. Now, this might be a little more difficult when it came to participating in their customs and especially their religious customs.

Keep in mind that they worshipped false gods and the religious laws they had were not handed down by the Lord of lords and King of kings.

So, how does one become all things to all men in cases like this? Again, it takes wisdom and understanding of the situation. When Paul went into Athens he didn't avoid those areas where people gathered to discuss philosophy and religion.

But, he didn't come storming into town and begin attacking their religious system of belief. He also didn't condone or participate in their false practices. What he did was to come along-side them as he showed compassion and understanding of where they were coming from.

Turn with me to Acts 17:22-34.....

Notice what Paul does here in becoming all things to all men without compromising the truth or his faith in Christ.

ACT 17:22-23 "Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you."

Paul begins by taking down any wall which may have been there as a result of him being a Jew. He does this by recognizing that despite that they are Gentiles they too can be religious. They too can be concerned with something or someone greater than themselves.

But he goes beyond this by honoring them in a sense as he shares how he took careful attention and time to those things which define their lives. What defined their lives was the worship of false gods.

Is Paul honoring them in this? Not at all. He's stating a fact about their perception of life and their need for a god. He's not simply trying to butter them up for his message, he's actually agreeing with God that all men have been given enough light to know that there is a God who created them, despite the fact that they have suppressed this knowledge because of their sin.

ROM 1:18-20 "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about

God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

Paul is saying that what you Athenians are doing is just what I would expect you to do in light of the fact that the Creator has made this knowledge available in your consciences and in creation. And in making these objects of worship you bear testimony to this truth. However, there is some information you have not considered in trying to approach God.

And so, Paul doesn't attack their system of belief at this point, he simply is trying to give them additional information which they haven't considered. He reasons with them like human beings should do. And he reasons with them from their perspective.

"I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you."

You see what Paul has done? By coming along-side them and understanding them to some extent, he has taken their belief system and added something to it. They have made an altar to an unknown god.

What does this imply? That there is the possibility that there may be a god out there we missed. And instead of offending this god we haven't met yet, we will appease him with sacrifices on this altar.

Paul seizes this opportunity by explaining that he knows who this unknown God is. Imagine how this turned the heads of everyone in that square. Now does Paul go on with some fanciful story about Greek mythology delivering this god to the earth and how he became a man and walked among men to save them from themselves?

No. But, he's now got their attention. They are listening to Paul and straining to hear about this unknown God he is about to make known.

ACT 17:24-25 "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else."

Paul reasons with them that this unknown God is actually the creator of the universe and as such doesn't need a temple to live in since such a God could not be contained in a building and certainly would not need such a dwelling.

In fact, since He is creator He doesn't depend on men to create abodes for him or to feed him or to take care of Him as He is represented in an idol because he Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

What Paul has just done is to separate his God from all others by teaching that the true God is above all, since He created all. But then Paul moves from God's sovereignty and power to His purpose.

ACT 17:27 "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."

Paul's God, unlike these other gods of the Greeks, wants to have a personal relationship with the one's He created. This is amazing. This is good news. This is the beginning of the gospel message. And I say the beginning of the good news because the good news is good only because the bad news is so bad. And Paul doesn't leave this out.

ACT 17:30-31 "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Paul makes it clear that this creator, though loving and desiring a relationship with men, still is just and holy and expects men everywhere to turn from their wicked ways and turn to the way of the Lord. If not, all men will be judged by this same God and none will escape. And to show that this is the true God and creator He has given proof of His intent and power by raising His appointed representative to mankind from the dead.

Paul doesn't sugar coat his message. But at least he had the opportunity to give the message. Imagine if he had come into Athens and simply began tearing down the belief system of these people. He would never have been given the opportunity to tell them the truth of this loving God who sent His Son to die for their sin.

Now it doesn't appear that Paul got much further than this and in fact it doesn't even appear that he was able to identify who this man appointed by God was.

ACT 17:32 "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

It seems this encounter was over in Athens. Paul did not get to show them how the O.T. Scriptures foretold of such an appointed Messiah. He didn't get to show them how Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled these prophecies and how He lived a perfect life among men and gave up His life so that men everywhere might have life through His resurrection life.

But he did get to sow some seeds. He did get to introduce them to this unknown God who was now made known to them to where they were interested to learn more. And he did it without trashing their customs and their religion, which would have done no more than turn them off to any discussion.

I've seen this happen time and again over the years. In fact, even in my own life with my family I remember trying to give them the truth. But, my first inclination as a young believer was to tell them how wrong they were before showing them how right I was.

The walls went up immediately. I've learned over the years to come along-side them and try to identify with them in the things we can agree upon. And from there I try to inform them of things they may not have considered about Jesus Christ and His salvation.

How many times have we tried to argue with the Jehovah's witnesses by attacking their system of belief as our first line of defense instead of meeting them where they are and coming along-side them as we then lead them into the truth of who Jesus Christ is.

Could we not reason with them and ask them questions like, "if God is Almighty Jehovah is it not possible that He has the ability to take on a second nature as that of man and come into this earth being fully God and fully man?"

They respond no, He did not do this. Again, our response. No, I didn't say He did. I asked is it not possible He could do this being Almighty? They would have to agree. And now, we can further reason with them as we take them to places in God's word which clearly teach that He did this.

We don't begin by biting off the head of our opponents and then reason they have ears to hear or eyes to see. This doesn't mean that they will agree with our final analysis of who God is or what Jesus Christ came to do. But it does show them that we care enough about them as fellow human beings to consider their way of looking at things.

But if we're going to reason with people then we have to have our minds engaged and we have to be prepared to give a defense for the hope we have in love. It's not necessarily essential that we study every cult in the world to better understand the people who are involved in those religions.

What is necessary is first a love for the lost. And then to understand the common denominator between them and us. That common denominator is sin. Whether it's a Mormon who believes that one day they will rule their own planet as they become the god of that planet with many wives who will help populate that planet, or a Hindu who believes that his good works will attain for him the perfect life, they are all still sinners just like us.

The particulars of their religions may differ, but like Paul reasoned, they are still seeking after something beyond themselves which God has placed in their consciences and in the very creation itself. If we will but be faithful with the good news and be willing to come along side people where they are and help them see the truth, God will open the doors for us just as He did for Paul.

People are not really that hard to figure out. They all want to be loved. They all want to be cared for and accepted and they all want to live life in a way where there is hope in store for them.

They may fill themselves up with the things of this world to try and accomplish this, but if we can simply understand what makes them tick there's no reason why we can't reason with them and direct them to the One who gives all hope and fulfills all our needs even beyond this world.

After all, we too are human beings with the same needs. We just happen to be human beings who have had these needs met in Christ in an eternal way, not just a temporal way. And if we're going to take the time to reason with people then we ought to reason with them in the way God would reason with them.

ISA 1:18 "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD.  
"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;  
though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

MIC 7:18-19 "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and  
forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You  
do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. 19 You will  
again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and  
hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."

This is the God we love and serve because He first loved us. But  
He didn't love just us but those of His from the whole world. And  
it just happens that our little part of the world includes the  
Charlotte county area. This is the field God has personally put in  
our care. Will we care for the people here and love them with the  
truth and seek ways to give them the truth?

Part of the process of reaching the lost is praying for the lost and  
each other. This is a good place to start and this is why we have  
devoted Wednesday evenings to this endeavor. Following Paul's  
lead and instruction is an endeavor which God will honor.

COL 4:2-6 "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and  
thankful. 3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our  
message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which  
I am in chains. 4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. 5  
Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of  
every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be always full of  
grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer  
everyone."