

Sermon 31: 1 Corinthians 9:19-27: Paul's sacrifice to win souls

OUTLINE

Paul's self-denial
Paul's self-control

INTRODUCTION

What would you be willing to do to save another's soul? To what lengths would you be willing to go that someone might hear the gospel? What would you be willing to do to ensure that you were not a stumbling block in them hearing the gospel? These are the questions that Paul is answering as he writes to the Corinthians in 9:19-27. I said when we began chapter nine that this is one of the most challenging chapters in the Bible when it comes to seeing a single-mindedness in seeing others be saved and served by the gospel. Paul is going to deeply confront us with how selfish we are and demonstrate what the life focused on seeing others saved looks like. The Corinthians are still immature in their faith and selfish in so many ways. Paul is addressing the matter of eating meat offered to idols, and before he deals with the problem of actually participating with demons, he first highlights the lovelessness in eating in such a way that weak Christians are being negatively influenced and dragged back into idolatry. Paul spoke about Christ's willingness to sacrifice Himself for the church; Paul made that big statement about being willing to give up eating meat altogether in order to serve a brother. And here we are in chapter 9 where Paul is giving an extended discussion on the giving up of personal liberties and rights in the service of another's salvation. Paul has demonstrated how he has given certain rights as an apostle to not be a stumbling block when it comes to preaching the gospel. Paul has revealed the desire that he has to see people saved pushing this sacrificial life forward. As we come to the closing part of this chapter Paul will talk about being a slave to all, and our two points will be looking at the areas of Paul's self-denial; and his self-control.

Paul's self-denial

V19, 'For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.' Chapter 9 can be divided into two parts based on the opening statements in v1, 'Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?' V1-18, deal with Paul proving he is an apostle who has rights and him demonstrating giving up those rights. V19-27, deal with the second matter of Paul's freedom which he likewise gives up in service of the gospel. Our culture has made an idol of freedom thinking that freedom is the path to satisfaction; and self-actualization. Paul, because he has been changed and reshaped by the gospel sees there to be something more important than his personal freedom. Paul is bent on saving souls. The text literally reads, 'I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win more of them.' This is the point Paul wants to leave with the Corinthians and so ends this section repeating this sentiment again in 10:31-33, 'So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.' We must not miss how Paul characterizing himself as a slave would hit in that context. Being free was desirable and honorable, being a slave was humiliating and to be a nobody. Paul gladly becomes the off-scouring of the earth, a nobody, because there is something so much more important that

others opinion of him. Like the OT slave when offered freedom decides to become a slave for life, Paul commits himself to perpetual servanthood because it enables him to save souls. Paul is not bragging about how devoted he is, he is sharing how the gospel has reordered his priorities so that every Corinthians will imitate him as He imitates Christ. The challenge here is for all of us, are we bent on saving souls or are we carried away with other distractions, legitimate or illegitimate?

How would you characterize your level of commitment to the great commission? Can you say with Paul that I am a slave to all people so that I may win some. If you think about Paul's life for a moment we can see that this is not hyperbole. Every aspect of Paul's life was centered on this priority of winning souls. Every minor decision, even down to what he ate or drank was governed by a desire to imitate Christ in laying down his life for others. Paul has forsaken marriage; Paul has embraced a difficult life of hardship, singleness, hard work, persecution, even imprisonment, all so that people might hear the gospel and be saved. A moment for self-reflection is called for here. This life is not exclusively the life of an apostle but should be the life of every Christian, is this you?

Paul then goes on to spell out how he is a slave to all, v20, '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.' Despite Paul being called as the apostle of the Gentiles here was a man with a deep love for the souls of his kinsmen who would exchange his own salvation for theirs if he could. Paul's primary identity was as a Christian not as a Jew, but by birth and heritage he was still attached to the Jewish people, and he was willing to submit himself to certain aspects of Jewish life in order to win a hearing for the gospel. This does not mean that Paul resubmitted himself to the law religiously for salvation as he used to do as a Pharisee. Paul tells us that he is freed from the ceremonial law of the OT. Now that Christ has come so much of what bound the nation of Israel no longer applies to the New Covenant people of God. No, it would have included going to synagogue on Saturdays, wearing his old Pharisee clothing so that he would be recognized as a teacher and be asked to preach, observing certain food laws when eating with Jews etc. Paul was willing to circumcise Timothy for this same purpose Acts 16:3; and even submitted himself to various vows in the temple to keep the peace in the Jerusalem church Acts 21:21-26. Most significantly though was his willingness to submit himself to the discipline of the synagogue by being flogged with 39 lashes 5 times, 2 Cor. 11:24. It was the practice that if you were convicted of error by the synagogue you could be accepted back into the fellowship if you willingly submitted yourself to being publicly flogged. Paul for the purpose of retaining access to the synagogue submitted himself to this practice. He willingly endured injustice to still have access to preach in the synagogue. He was willing to be seen and treated as a heretic and punished by the very ones who were committing heresy just so that he could win the heretics. Why? That he may win more to Christ.

V21, '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.' Paul having been brought up as a Jew and under the law would have felt out of place with Gentile culture and practices. But like a missionary willing to immerse themselves in the food, culture and life of the people they hope to win, Paul does the same. Paul makes very clear that being outside the law does not mean that he loved an immoral life contrary to the law of God. No. Paul

clearly speaks about still being under law, namely the law of Christ. What is the law of Christ? Some who drive a deep wedge between the OT and the NT try to say that all law including the 10 commandments no longer apply to the NT Christian. The problem with this view is that the promise of the New Covenant in Jer. 31 promises that the law would be written upon our hearts, which law is this? It would be the moral law of God summarized in the 10 Commandments. We should not think that Paul is proposing a new law in the place of God's law. No, there are two key ideas we should take from this. Firstly, we should appreciate this statement as one of a high Christology. In the OT the law was the law of God, to say that it is the law of Christ is to say something about the deity of Christ. But secondly, given the context and the emphasis that Paul is making, he is not trying to imply a new law code, but rather is more likely speaking of the law of Christ's selfless love as a the pattern for how all Christians should live. All believers are obligated to live a Christlike life of loving selflessness. It is a law it is not optional. The very point Paul is driving into the hearts of these selfish Corinthians.

Now we must be clear Paul is not suggesting that the content of the gospel would change in any way. Paul is not adapting the truth of the gospel to suit his hearers compromising on talking about sin, or judgement, or the exclusivity of Christ. When he talks about coming to those outside the law he is not implying that he does not mention the need for repentance, or that there is no high demand to live a life of holiness as a Christian. No, the Jews had a bad reputation among the Gentiles and Paul insisting on his Jewish identity could have confused the matter because the Gentiles would think that they would have to convert to Judaism, or it could have unnecessarily prevented a hearing of the gospel.

V22, '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.' Paul chooses the group that the so called knowers in Corinthians have not been loving, using the word 'weak' to characterize them, not because he has a low opinion of them but because this is the sort of thing these proud Corinthians would be thinking. Paul has already intimated that he was willing to give up meat for the sake of their spiritual progress, 8:13. He was willing to associate with them; take the time to talk with them and instruct them; and even put up with their foibles as they learnt to walk with more strength. As a lover of souls, he not only loved his own countrymen but the Gentiles too; not only those who were quick enough to keep up and who agreed with him, but those who were weak as well. He not only cared about those who were outside the church and needed the gospel but those young converts in the church that needed nurturing as well. You can imagine Paul as he encountered someone new. He would be thinking about them in their relationship before God. He would be thinking about what their understanding was and where he would need to begin in explaining the gospel. No Paul was not looking for notches on his belt, he had a deep and genuine concern for souls.

What drives a man like Paul to do such things? A one-time hater of Christ and persecutor of the church; a one-time Jewish purist who would have looked down his nose at Gentiles; an accomplished student and genius level intellect persevering with slow and fickle people? The answer is easy, because of Christ. Paul was not the first missionary who left the comfort of his home to come to the needy, Christ was. Paul was not the first cross cultural missionary who adopted an alien culture and dress to reach the lost, Christ was. Remember what Jesus told His disciples, Mark 10:43-45, 'But it shall not be so among you. But whoever

would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This is the law of Christ that Paul obeys, that Paul seeks to example and calls the Corinthians to obey as well. John 13:1-5, ‘Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.’ Phil. 2:3-5, ‘Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.’

V23, Paul reveals more of his motivation, ‘I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.’ Now many have misinterpreted this verse thinking that Paul is like the JW who comes knocking on your door preaching because they believe that their salvation hangs in the balance. This is not what Paul means, to imply that Paul was being selfless for a selfish reason would completely undermine the point Paul is trying to make to the Corinthians. No, he is saying that he is willing to be a slave of all because of the gospel, because he has been a beneficiary of it, and because this good news has so gripped him that he feels indebted to share it with all people. He is a sinner saved by grace, unworthy yet too blessed to measure and this gospel saves others into this fullness. Some things are enjoyed more for sharing, this is so true when it comes to God’s grace. The very nature of it, that God is more generous than any one of our heart can hold makes us hunger and delight in seeing it spread to millions more. Our joy in it, our wonder of it, God’s glory is magnified by this multiplication. Paul can’t wait to share with the weak, the Gentiles, the Jews who murdered Christ in the new creation because he too is an unworthy sinner.

Paul’s self-control

Paul has declared himself a slave of all and demonstrated the various ways he denies his freedom to serve others. Paul now moves onto another important point. In order to be a slave to all we must be self-controlled. Paul now, drawing on the familiar images of an athlete and a boxer that would have participated in the Isthmian and Olympic games, demonstrates the need for self-control in order to be a winner of souls.

V24, ‘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.’ How would you describe your walk with the Lord? Are you coasting? Are you content to merely keep up with the pack? Are you putting in the minimal effort? Paul talks to us about our attitude to the way we live our Christian lives. Paul is challenging us concerning our mediocrity and lack of diligence in zeal. Ordinarily speaking only one person wins first prize in a race, but the Christian life is not a competition where we simply make an effort to stay ahead of those around us. No it is about making the best effort we can with the gifts and opportunities given to us. We run

before God not man, we should be giving our all as Christ gave all for us. To quote the missionary martyr Jim Elliot, 'Wherever you are, be all there.' Paul is not talking about the Christian life in general but specifically about the efforts we make to see the lost saved, and the efforts we make to serve the weak in the church.

V25, 'Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.' Next Paul talks about the well-known lifestyle of an athlete and the discipline needed. Those who participated in the Isthmian game in Corinth committed themselves to a 10 month regime of strict living before the games. They would live in Corinth and enter a rigorous training regime that would regulate when and what you ate, how long you slept, regular training for the race. These athletes are running for something, some run for glory, others for the prize money, today many will speak of patriotism, some will speak about being their best selves. Paul recognizes the temporal nature of an athletes motivation yet they still apply themselves for all they are worth. How much more should the Christian apply themselves when their prize is not temporary but eternal. Now what is the imperishable wreath that Paul is referring to? Is it salvation? Is it rewards? I agree with those who recognize that Paul is using this as a metaphor for precious souls. Paul says as much to the Philippians, 4:1, 'Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.'

V26a, 'So I do not run aimlessly.' Paul runs with his eyes on the prize allowing it to motivate him and remind him of what truly matters, allowing it to enthuse him when he is tired, to encourage him when he feels like he has nothing left in the tank. He does not start and stop, get distracted by something else, but keeps his eyes set firm on the prize.

Paul then brings in his second metaphor, v26b-27, 'I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.' As with the athlete we are not competing against others but against ourselves; so with the boxer we are not punching shadows, our enemy is not even others but we are brutal with our own bodies. That word discipline means 'to give a black eye.' The so called knowers were set on fulfilling their appetites and eating meat offered to idols, Paul is calling here for a control of appetites. If Paul preaches, and even guards his doctrine, but does not guard his life and exercise self-control he could be disqualified from the apostolic ministry, losing any ability to be a minister of the gospel. Even though he is called by God; even though he is gifted for the task; even though he has seen much fruit even the great apostle Paul must walk in holiness and guard his heart every day lest he fall into sin and disqualify himself from ministry.

We can see Paul's point clearly, we are called to live a Christ like life; we are called to prioritize other's needs, especially the lost and the nurturing of saints in the church. This is to be a great prize to us because we get to love others as Christ loved us, and share with others in this glorious gift magnifying the grace of God. But to do this, we cannot be thoughtless, selfish, pushy about our rights, accusatory, or condescending towards others because they are not as informed as we are. We also have to guard ourselves and not give way to our desires but deny ourselves in order to serve others better. Let me close with the story of two Moravian missionaries who were lovers of souls:

'Their names were John Leonard Dober and David Nitschman. They were Moravian missionaries who were willing to sell themselves into slavery to win the lost with the gospel. Here is their story: It was a slave himself who stirred the Moravian church in Germany into action [to the West Indies] in 1731, when Anthony Ulrich, a former slave from St. Thomas then in the country, was invited by Count Zinzendorf to make a plea for missionaries to be sent to the West Indies, before the congregation of Herrnhut. He told them that no one could possibly preach to the slaves unless he first became a slave himself. They had to work all day on the plantations, and after sunset were not allowed to go out. Thus no one could preach who did not work with them. Dober and Nitschmann, two prominent members of the congregation, volunteered to go, and Dober was actually prepared to see himself into slavery, had not the law of the Danish West Indies prohibited it. Instead, Dober started his work as an overseer on a cotton plantation, and Nitschmann did jobs as a carpenter. (Furley, "Moravian Missionaries," 3) There is a tradition that says as the two men said goodbye to their weeping families, they shouted from their ship, "May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of this suffering." Here are the hearts of soulwinners. May our Lord grant to us hearts like theirs, a heart like Paul's, a heart like our King's.¹

We are about to partake of the Lord's Supper together, how can what we have heard prepare us to remember well as we eat together?

Let me read from John 13:12-17, 'When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.' V34-35, 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'" It is no mistake that the night Christ gave a meal to commemorate what He was doing for us, He also commanded us to do likewise. Every time we eat this supper we remember Christ in His selfless love, and are reminded of the command to wash one another's feet. With feet still damp and clean from the washing Christ had given them the disciples will have been urged to love one another. We too come today, with our sins forgiven and are called to love one another.

1 Daniel L. Akin, ["The Heart of a Soul Winner \(1 Corinthians 9:19-27\)."](#) in *Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Brentwood, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2023), 191-192.