

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

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Though Paul is not beholden to any man since he is not paid by man, his ministry's purpose is to meet every person right where they are to share the gospel. He continues to practice Judaism to witness to the Jews, he works and lives among the Gentiles to witness to them.

Paul has just asked the question *What then is my reward?* (verse 18) and is making an extended answer. His initial statement indicated that he wanted to *offer the gospel without charge* to curb his own flesh. To ensure that he does not just do the minimum, but gains the greatest reward from doing his job *voluntarily* (willingly).

Paul now adds a second reason he preaches the gospel without raising financial support—because he thinks it is more effective. He states, *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.* This statement fits with verse 18 in that Paul is setting aside his own comfort in order to elevate the effectiveness of his ministry. He has set aside personal comfort in order to *win more* people to Christ. He has reasoned that his willingness to preach *voluntarily* (verse 17) will lead to a greater effectiveness in reaching more for the gospel. And more effectiveness will mean a greater reward.

Paul told the neighboring believers in Thessalonica (whom he had led to Christ through preaching the gospel) that they were a part of his future reward. He believed that them being rewarded for faithfulness by Jesus would be a great reward in heaven for him (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). Bringing more people to Christ will bring more opportunity for Paul to share in the reward of those whom he wins.

Paul does not have to preach because of any obligation to any person. He asserts that he is *free from all men*. Paul has no obligation to any human. But he has set aside his own pride, his own comfort, and his own rights in order to win the greatest reward possible through pursuing obedience to Christ. In doing this, he has become *a slave to all*.

Becoming a *slave to all* does not mean that Paul now does what someone else tells him to do. This very letter to the church at Corinth makes clear that this is not the case; Paul has asserted he is *free from all men*. Rather, he has become a *slave to all* in that he is orienting his actions toward the best interest of others, according to his calling. And he has determined that by paying his own way, he can *win more* people to Christ.

Paul continues to expound on what it means to have *voluntarily* become a *slave to all*. His primary strategy seems to be to meet people right where they are, so they can best hear and identify with the gospel of Jesus. Paul states that, *To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews.* This is consistent with his goal to *win more*. Paul, of course, is Jewish. He continued to practice Jewish customs throughout his ministry (Acts 28:17). This is consistent with this rationale.

Paul had Timothy circumcised in order to *win Jews*, since Timothy's mother was Jewish. He did this even though he was adamant that Gentiles ought not be circumcised because that would be seeking to be justified by their own deeds (Galatians 2:17). When Paul went to a new city, he usually preached in the local synagogue, which was where Jews would gather to worship (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:1; 17:10,17;18:4,19).

Paul kept the Jewish customs rigorously as an example *to those who are under the Law* (Jews). Paul behaved *as under the Law* by keeping the Jewish customs, even though he knew that in Christ it was unnecessary. He recognized that, in Christ, he was *not* himself *under the Law*. Paul saw that the Jewish customs were just customs. Habits. They had no connection with being justified in the sight of God. And they were not the path to gain righteousness in living (Romans 9:30-32). However, his goal was to *win those who are under the law*. So he met the Jews where they were. He did not want to create a stumbling block. He set aside his own comfort for the benefit of others.

On the other hand, to the Gentiles, those *without law*, he met them where they were as well. He did not require them to meet him where he was. Paul himself was *not being without the law of God*. He kept all the Jewish customs, as he just stated. But Paul realized that he was subject to a higher law than the law of Moses. Paul recognized that he was *under the law of Christ*. Jesus put an end to law for all who believe (Romans 10:4). He sent the Holy Spirit to write the law on the hearts of all who believed in Him (Hebrews 8:10). So that now, when believers in Jesus walk in the Spirit, they fulfill the law (Romans 8:4).

His goal in meeting Gentiles on their own terms was *so that I might win those who are without law*, i.e. the Gentiles. The "law" Paul is referring to is the Jewish law, the Torah. It could be that a primary way Paul connected with Gentiles was through his work. Mingling in the marketplace, along with other Gentile Romans.

Paul connected with people wherever they were. He says *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak*. Perhaps his idea of being *weak* is to choose to earn his own bread by working vocationally. The word translated *weak* can also be translated "unimpressive." Paul was earning his wages right alongside the Gentiles in the city. He was living as a commoner. Perhaps it was in the workplace that he was able to connect with people, to give him the opportunity to win them.

Paul states that *I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some*. Paul is still answering the question "What then is my reward?" (Verse 18). He will get to the actual reward (prize) in the next passage. In this passage he has been telling the Corinthian church his motive for forgoing his right to receive financial support as a gospel minister. The reward he is seeking causes him to set aside comfort, self, pride, and anything else that might hinder him. He summarizes this section with a general statement:

I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

Everything Paul does, he does for *the sake of the gospel*. It is important to note that Paul's idea of *the gospel* is comprehensive. It includes being born again, which is how people enter the

family of God. This is by grace, through faith, and is apart from deeds (John 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Gospel means “good news.” There is a lot more to the “good news” of Jesus Christ than our opportunity to be born into God’s family. The amazing reality of God’s family is that it is a royal family, with a royal inheritance. Paul does *all things for the sake of the gospel* that he might become a *fellow partaker* of the gospel. By bringing others to Christ, Paul brings the opportunity for great blessings to others. At the end of this chapter, Paul will invite the Corinthians (and all believers who come after) to partake in the gospel to the fullest extent.

Being in God’s family is a free gift, given unconditionally through faith. But each believer can also inherit reigning with Christ in His kingdom, through obedience. This is amazingly good news. That reward is conditioned on walking in the obedience of Christ. Paul sets forth this principle clearly in Romans 8:16-17:

“The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.”
(Romans 8:16-17)

Note that being “heirs of God” is an unconditional reality for anyone who has the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is given to believers upon their initial belief. God’s acceptance is unconditional.

But being “fellow heirs with Christ” is a conditional reward. God’s approval is conditional upon our actions. Our heavenly Parent only approves those things that benefit. We gain the reward of being “fellow heirs with Christ” only “IF indeed we suffer with Him.” We suffer with Jesus by following in complete dependence, serving others in humility. Seeking their best with our best. This is the way in which we can be “glorified” with Jesus, by sharing his reward as a “fellow heir,” reigning over His kingdom. Paul is explaining to the Corinthians the manner in which he is applying this principle to his own life.

Paul is buffeting his own flesh in order to win this great reward. Paul has chosen a harder life, rather than seeking the comfort available to him by raising a team of financial supporters. Working to pay his own way is just one of many paths Paul has chosen that is a path of less comfort (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). In each case, Paul is making a shrewd investment calculation. He is seeking to set aside comfort in order to suffer the sufferings of Christ, that he might win the greatest prize available in life. That prize is to please Jesus. To walk in the workmanship which He had prepared beforehand (Ephesians 2:10).

Next, Paul uses an athletic analogy to further his point. He will cover this in the last verses of this chapter.

Biblical Text

¹⁹ For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; ²¹ to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. ²³ I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.