

# The Heart of the Great Commission

## 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

**October 3 & 4, 2009**  
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Pastor Jim Pitts, our Pastor of Student Ministries is actually going to give the introduction to my sermon today. He's going to share about something that happened at AO (Alpha Omega Student Ministries) this past Thursday night.

*I am very humbled to be able to share with you the events of our Thursday night worship service. This past week, everything that could go wrong to set up for that night did. So many people were missing, things weren't done and I'm a perfectionist and this little stuff just bothered the living daylights out of me. My message wasn't coming together...and God was about to show me that He cares more about the Student Ministry than I ever could.*

*As the night began, everything from a selection that Brant Molenaar and Elevate had put together of the songs, to the mini challenge that one of our youth workers, Lane, brought, everything kept pointing toward the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. When I got up there I was going to preach from Mark 6:30-34, the beginning of Jesus breaking the bread and feeding the 5,000. But as I got into my first point, I had an overwhelming sense and desire to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ pure. I felt verses just flood my mind and begin to come out of my mouth as I began to quote Scripture after Scripture. I'm not exactly sure all of what I said but 40 minutes later I knew that the gospel had been preached. I knew that the gift of God had been presented through Jesus' shed blood. I knew that the message that Jesus cared for them more than any human being could ever do and that He wanted to have a relationship with them and provided a way to do that came through.*

*I don't often give invitations. We want our teens to make professions that last a lifetime, not because of music that has been put together or by man's efforts, so I rarely give invitations where they immediately respond publicly. But that night I felt called to do so and I made a very difficult and hard-pressed challenge. I asked them with everyone still seated if anyone wanted to initiate and start a relationship with Jesus Christ, if they had never done so before, in front of all their peers, would they stand up and go back to a room and just spend some time with some leaders opening the Word of God and finding out how to start that relationship. Teenager after teenager got up and walked back to the room without caring who was around them or what happened.*

*As they did so, one guy got up and a couple girls started crying and I found out afterwards that these young ladies had been praying for and witnessing to this young man for over a year not ever knowing if he would ever accept Jesus Christ as His Savior. When he came out of that room, the joy that penetrated his smile, the passion he had, the love for Christ, the hugs that he gave them, he couldn't wait to exclaim the fact that he had a new relationship with Jesus Christ.*

*That night we saw nine teenagers accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. We had four give sins over to the Lord. We had two recommit their lives and say "I'm all in; I want to live for Christ." I had one junior high guy before I even got back to my office send me a text that said, "The sermon tonight woke me up from the fact that it truly doesn't matter what others think of me because I am a Christian. It only matters to me what God*

*thinks and now I could care less if I have to lose my so-called friends in the process of growing stronger in my walk. It doesn't bother me anymore."*

*I just want to share this with you: If God is whispering in your ear, and the Holy Spirit is pounding on your heart to share the gospel, your efforts to do that will be blessed. God wants us to share the gospel of His good news of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross so that others can come to know Him.*

Why does that make us happy? That is what it's all about – God working through the gospel and people to bring repentance, faith, and salvation. You have probably heard it said there are only two things in this world that last, the word of God and people. Every person we see is an immortal soul that will spend eternity either with God and eternal bliss or without God in hell and punishment. There really are only two options and the Church is the steward of the one message that saves and Christ gave us the charge to take this message to the entire world. How will this ever happen? Why are we so often anemic and ineffective? Thursday night's blessing and the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9 will help us see it.

*But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. (1 Corinthians 9:15-18)*

Chapter 9 is Paul's personal manifesto. We see what made the Apostle Paul tick. In verse 12, we saw his total commitment. He said he would endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. What endurance is he talking about? While he had the right to financial support from the churches, he refused to receive it and did manual labor to meet his own needs.

He says in verse 18 that his "reward" or ministry compensation is that he doesn't receive payment for it. How would that be received where you work? The boss announces, *Your compensation today will be the joy of not receiving compensation.* Obviously, Paul didn't do what he did for money. His reward was gospel salvation and transformation in the lives of the church.

*To have mended one shattered life, to have restored one wanderer to the right way, to have healed one broken heart, to have brought one individual to Christ is not a thing whose reward can be measured in financial terms; but its joy is beyond all measurement. (Barclay, p. 98).*

He explains why this is his "boast." First, he is a gospel minister by divine calling. He says in Galatians 1:15 that God set him aside from birth for this task. He says here, *Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel* (1 Corinthians 16). The woe is not internal sorrow but rather divine judgment upon him. Christ had commissioned him as an Apostle to the Gentiles. He had a sacred and holy call on his life. Woe to Him if he ignored this divine call.

Secondly, we see the fervor of the Apostle. I want you to look carefully at verse 15. *I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.* The English smooths it out but in the Greek it is an incomplete sentence. *It would be better for me to die than....* Like the emotion comes over him. It just ends there. Preaching the gospel wasn't a job for him. It wasn't merely a way to pay the bills. He wasn't going through the pastoral motions.

Paul had a divine call on his life. He wasn't in it for money or title or prestige or anything else. He was in it for God and His glory and the gospel and people.

Needless to say, what churches need today is men and women leading and serving like Paul. Not ecclesiastical shopkeepers, not church politicians, not pastoral CEOs, not ministry professionals, but men and women with a sense of divine calling who are not caught up with what ministry can do for them but with what the gospel can do for their people.

I remember years ago visiting a church. They were having communion. The pastor got up and did a little chat before communion. I could tell he wasn't into it. No fire. No emotion. No pathos. Just blah-blah-blah. I left there and said in my heart, *I never want to do that*. Where holy things and gospel ministry are so familiar that I don't tremble at what it means to hold the bread and the cup and the Bible and the dedicated child and the hand of the sick at the hospital bed and the hug of the grieving. When ministry is familiar, ministry is dead and so is the church.

You may be sitting here thinking, *I'm not an Apostle and Jesus didn't appear to me on the road to Damascus, so how does this relate to me?* Paul shows four necessary qualities for any person or any church that will ever reach its community for Christ. We will only see two today.

## **Passion**

Passion. The word means a powerful or compelling emotion; an overwhelming zeal or fervor. You can know what you are passionate about by what you are willing to die for. Paul was a normal human being like you and me with all the human frailties that we experience in the day to day of life. Yet, Paul had something that is all too lacking in nominal Christianity. He had passion. Thoughts of life and death, joy and sorrow, eternal life and divine judgment brought him to tears. *I would rather die than...*

*For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.* (Romans 9:3) You can say what you want about Paul, but there was no denying his passion and zeal for God. I would assume this was part of his appeal; he got people's attention by the raw and pure passion he had for Christ.

This is in sharp contrast to the all too common blah, emotionless, passionless expression of faith in the risen Christ. Nobody is apostolic all the time. We are sinners after all. But what can we say when there is the chronic absence of passion for God in people who claim to be saved from hell by Him? Claim to be recipients of his grace? Claim to be children of God? How about a little passion? How about a little joy? How about a little emotion? What are we afraid of? Someone might think we actually believe this stuff? When was the last time we shed a spiritual tear for someone? Felt a sense of woe upon our lives? Had a little fear of God? Displayed in some way that we actually care about the things of God, the gospel, and the church?

I am not talking about emotionalism or some contrived joy, but the real thing that flows from real gratefulness to God for his mercy to us. I heard Paul Harvey say he never saw a monument erected for a pessimist. We will never see anything accomplished for God without enthusiasm and passion. The heart of the Great Commission is passion for God.

When you cross paths with someone like this, you know it. They have an energy. An earnestness. A zeal. One of my heroes is the evangelist George Whitefield. He shook colonial America with the gospel. In spite of preaching multiple times every day for years,

whenever he spoke of the gospel the tears would run down his face. He was so earnest for God and people. Benjamin Franklin was an agnostic, but loved to hear Whitefield preach. One day while he was on his way to hear Whitefield preach, someone stopped him and said, "Franklin, why are you going to hear Whitefield? You don't believe that stuff." Franklin said, "I don't, but he does." Whitefield had such earnestness that thousands flocked to hear his message.

What the world needs is not richer Christians or more famous Christians or even necessarily more Christians. The world needs real Christians with passion - the kind of Christian who could legitimately say, "If I don't serve Christ I'd rather die." These are the people who make a difference for Christ. They impact their spouse, their children, their family, their workplace, their neighborhood, and their community. There's something there. You know it when you see it.

Take a moment. Think of a passionate Christian that you have known. I remember Dan Cummings. When I was in college, I used to go and hear this 26 year old preacher and watch him weep as he spoke to his congregation. I would put Abraham Thomas in that category. Is it any wonder God is using him in India the way he is? I used to sit in the front row at College Park Church. Frequently, my heart would melt as Kimber Kauffman spoke of the gospel. He would do so with passion and often, liquid would start pouring out of all the portals of his face. Guess what people in the congregation thought? *This guy really believes this* and they flocked to the church.

The world is dying for something to believe in and the gospel of Jesus Christ is so massive and beautiful, that when we claim to believe it but have no passion, their conclusion is that it must not be true.

Where does a lifestyle of passion for God and passion for the Great Commission come from? It comes from the gospel itself. It flows from a personal brokenness over our sin. Not just generic sin but my sin - my unfaithfulness, my pride, my rebellion, my lusts, my everything. To think that God would love somebody like me. That Christ would die for "such a worm as I." Passion is the natural byproduct of astonishment of God's love for me. This same Paul said, *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost* (1 Timothy 1:15). To meet Paul was to meet a guy who still remembered that he had aided in the murder of Stephen, had persecuted the Church, had thrown Christians in jail, and lived in the pride of religious accomplishment. Paul never got over the gospel of God's grace to him. That is why Christian passion is not contrived. It's humble and real and earnest. *I'd rather die than not serve Christ*. Passion. Are you passionate for God? For the Great Commission? For building the church? For reaching lost people?

*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them... I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.* (1 Corinthians 9:19, 22b-23)

This is one of the most important passages in Scripture dealing with the contextualization of the gospel. How do we preach and live the gospel in a multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious culture? Paul had to think through the issues because he was travelling abroad and interacting with a variety of cultures. How do you contextualize that message in a Jewish synagogue? In a Greek city like Athens? Before a crowd of Jews at the temple? The palace of King Agrippa? To island people in Malta? In the capital of the world, Rome?

We could ask the question (and by the way we are). How do we reach the Dutchmen in Demotte? The African American community of Gary? The business community of Munster? The Hispanic communities of East Chicago and Hammond? The local Muslim and Hindu communities? The medical community? Merrillville, Schererville, St. John, Lowell, Hebron, and most importantly, Leroy. Is it one size fits all? Does the same ministry approach work in Demotte as Gary? Often the answer is no.

This is where the challenges of contextualization arise and a church that is going beyond its walls is faced with some difficult and at times messy realities. But the church has always had these challenges and Paul lays out a paradigm for how to take the unchanging gospel to the diverse and ever changing cultures of the world (and also to your neighbor, your child, your agnostic coworker, your atheist fellow student, and your weird in-laws).

## Servanthood

*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. (Verse 19)*

There is a great contradiction here. First of all, Paul was an Apostle. Paul also was a Roman Citizen. He was born to a wealthy family and his citizenship was a birthright to him. Paul was highly educated, trained in the finest religious schools of the day. He was an educated, privileged, well connected Roman Citizen. The last thing someone like that would do is call themselves a slave. Yet that is what he does here. *Doulos* in the Greek. Slaves were the absolute bottom of the social ladder. They had no rights whatsoever. Nobody willingly became a slave.

Paul did. *I have enslaved myself to all men.* Why would someone make themselves a slave, especially someone with a resume like Paul's? Last clause, "that I might win more of them." Win? Win to what? Win their hearts and souls to the gospel. Paul wanted to see people embrace Christ in faith as Savior and Lord. He wanted for them what he received that day on the road to Damascus.

Servanthood. I would suppose that this is one of the reasons we don't win as many as we might. We aren't inclined to serving others by putting their spiritual needs ahead of our agendas. Think of the person God used to reach you with the gospel. Parent. Coworker. Relative. Pastor. Youth pastor. College roommate. Friend. Is it not true that in every case, that person was willingly a servant to you? In what ways? Time. Attention. Love. Boldness to share. Kindness. Was anybody led to Christ by someone who hated you? Hurt you? Stole from you? Abused you?

***Gospel ministry is a picture of the gospel itself.*** The gospel is that Christ enslaved Himself for us.

- *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)*
- *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant... (Philippians 2:5-7)*

Why do you suppose servanthood is so effective in spreading the gospel? It's hard to fake servanthood. I think of Merle McCleskey, one of our members. For 30 years, Merle has gone to the Lake County Jail to serve the inmates as Chaplain. He receives no compensation.

They call him Father Mac. Jail ministry isn't glamorous and I doubt the inmates are sending him thank you notes and flowers. But what can they know about this white haired old man who comes to them with a big smile on his face? He is there because he wants to be. He is there by choice. They listen because they know he cares.

I think of Mel Kemp. A retired accountant in our church who serves the community week in and week out by delivering lunches with Meals on Wheels. I don't think he accepts tips. Serving.

And this week I think my childhood friend Matt Hundley's mom. Her name is Billie. (see picture below)



For decades she faithfully served her husband Richard. This was not easy for all the normal reasons. On top of those, Richard had no interest in spiritual things. His demeanor was difficult at times. For a period of time, he refused to let her go to church at all. All these years, Billie was a faithful and very servant-hearted wife. She prayed and prayed for her husband to come to faith. A couple years ago, melting started to happen in his heart. He got sick and started thinking about life and death. He started to go to church. She was so happy to have him with her. He liked the pastor of the little country church. Over the years, Billie's life didn't turn him off to Christianity; it eventually helped win him over. She personally led him to faith. He was baptized in the country church. Monday of this past week his family gathered in that little church to bury him. As a boy in their home many times, I was afraid of him. It's almost hard for me to believe that he became a Christian. But that is the power of servanthood.

When we love the very people God has called us to reach, and love them by serving them, it is compelling because it is genuine. It's real. Just like the gospel. Who might God be calling you to enslave yourself to for gospel purposes?

This is the heart of the Great Commission. Passion flowing through humility of heart and genuine servanthood to people just like us in desperate need of the gospel. May God make us just that sort of church. We will do more in the future on the heart of the gospel.

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