

# All Things to All People

## 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

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I am going to begin with some hand-raising questions. I rarely do this, but it's leading to a point. These are questions about personal involvement in the Great Commission or what we call evangelism. The word evangelism comes from the Greek word that means gospel. Evangelism is sharing the saving message of Jesus with someone else.

- How many of you Christians here think your efforts in personal evangelism are what they should be?
- How many of you wish you were more effective as a witness for Christ?
- If it would help lead someone to salvation, how many of you would consider adjusting something unimportant in your life?
- If a Saturday/Sunday message might help you become a better witness for Christ, how many of you would be excited to hear it?

That's my hope for this weekend – a collective increase in our courage and commitment to sharing Christ in our spheres of life, me included. Pastor Charles Spurgeon kept this theme before his people with statements like this: *If there be any point in which the Christian church ought to keep its fervor at a white heat, it is concerning missions. If there be anything about which we cannot tolerate lukewarmness, it is the matter of sending the gospel to a dying world.* (Charles Spurgeon) We can't reach the world by ourselves, but we can reach the world by us – our world; our village; our neck of the woods. With God's help, we can engage our little world to which God has called us to share Christ.

We've been away from 1 Corinthians for three weeks but we pick it up again in 9:19. Chapter 9 is Paul's autobiography. These Corinthian Christians were all about their rights; some were strong in conscience and had personal freedom in lifestyle areas. Others were weak and did not. The real problem at Corinth was their priorities. Their enjoyment of a freedom was more important than the spiritual welfare of their fellow Christian. The strong were right in doctrine, but wrong in attitude.

Paul expands the principle from Christian-to-Christian relationships to our relationships with unbelievers and is going to say that our preferences should be accommodated in whatever way is most beneficial to reach people for Christ.

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

You can understand this whole section by getting verse 22, *I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.* The word "all" is repeated three times. All things. All people. All means. Let's just walk through those.

**Become all things** – Paul is describing his flexibility and willingness to personally adapt to becoming the culture or perspective of the person or group he is trying to reach. *Become* means change. Adapt. Acclimate. Think chameleon; only the purpose isn't to hide, it's to bridge, to relate, to build affinity. He's not talking about immoral categories. He doesn't become a murderer to reach the murderers or a thief to reach the thieves. He is talking about contextualizing himself to where the unsaved are. Their lives. Worldview. Pains. Joys. Perspectives. For who?

**To all people** – Have you noticed that not everybody is the same? Look around this room. We have massive differences in backgrounds, perspectives, affinities, interests, presuppositions. Northwest Indiana has incredible diversity. Pastor Travis told me an interesting statistic: nearly 70,000 people in our community speak a language other than English at home. Expand that to the cultural diversity in this world. Missions trips help us realize how huge and different this world is. That was a thought I had in China as I looked across a packed Tiananmen Square. This world is a really big place. Billions of people live in cultural settings much different than mine. *Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight.* Paul says, *I will become whatever it takes to build a bridge for gospel witness with anyone who crosses my path.* Really, why would you be so intentionally flexible?

**By all means I might save some** – How many of us like to get out of our comfort zones? *Change?* Accommodate to the cultural or personal preferences of other people? Not unless there is a really good reason to. Paul gives the compelling motivation for flexibility. *So that I might save some.* Is the salvation of a soul worth this personal effort? The saving of some is worth the effort to all. I remember Mark Cahill telling us if it doesn't matter in 100 years, it doesn't matter. A hundred years from now, what really matters? We're all dead. What matters when we're all dead? Lots of things we care about today fall off the list. What matters in 100 years is eternal destiny. Heaven or hell. Eternal blessing or curse. My eternity and the destiny of my family, children, neighbor, fellow student, guy next to me on the plane and every other precious soul made in the image of God.

Paul understood that. I wonder if we do. Too often, I don't. I forget. I get busy. The value of that soul and their eternal destiny too often shrinks next to my fear, personal agenda, schedule or whatever.

Here's one indication of whether I value people and the gospel, how willing am I to socially flex so I can relate to a person, people group, ethnic group or community for the sake of the gospel? If their eternal destiny is not that important to us, we'll never flex to build a bridge for the gospel. Might this not explain why when churches lose their vision for reaching their community, they become inwardly focused? *They need to become like us.* These churches could have banners hanging around the church that say, *It's All About Us.*

It is always this desire that "some might be saved" that should motivate us to do what none of us naturally want to do...change. Innovate. Reach out to someone different than us. Love. *I become all things to all people that by all means I might save some.* What do you mean Paul? How did you do this? That is verses 20-22.

### **Cultural Flexibility (Verse 20)**

He distinguishes the Jewish culture from the Jewish religion in his next sentence. *Become a Jew to win the Jews* means accommodating his approach to the unique perspectives of Jewish culture. Cultural accommodation doesn't mean gospel accommodation. Paul never did that nor should we. What it means is what Paul did. When he went to a Jewish

synagogue, he spoke, dressed, and used the culture of the Jews as a starting point for talking about Jesus. He argued from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah. Why? The Old Testament was their authority. Ministry to the Jews to this day begins in the Old Testament. I had dinner this week with Bethel members Wes and Lori Taber. They head up Life in Messiah ministry which is an outreach to Jews around the world. They are excited about a new ministry center in the heart of the Jewish section of Brooklyn in New York City. They related to me how they build bridges by asking Jews they come in contact with, *In Isaiah 53 who was the suffering servant Isaiah described?* There are only two options. The nation Israel or a person. If it's a person, who is it? Might it be Yeshua? Jesus.

What they are NOT doing is serving ham and bacon for lunch with signs outside saying, *Jesus is the Messiah, what's your problem? Come in if you'd like to be like us!* Their starting point is where their audience is at. They are respectful of the culture and use it as a bridge for the gospel. So did Paul. Does that mean Paul changed the gospel for the sake of cultural relevance? No. It does mean having a genuine love for the people and appreciation for the culture that they can sense. Become a Jew to reach the Jews. Or a Russian to reach the Russians. Or a Northwest Indianan to reach a Northwest Indianan.

## Religious Flexibility

### Seeking the unsaved religious (Verse 20)

*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.*

The law referred to here is the Old Testament law. Let me give you a quick summary of it so we can understand this passage. The Old Testament law can be divided into three parts: *moral Law* (summarized in the Ten Commandments), *civil law* (laws pertaining to Israel as a functioning nation), and *ceremonial law* (washings, feasts, sacrifices, etc.). With the coming of Jesus, the civic and ceremonial aspects were fulfilled and abolished. God's people are no longer civically a nation and the sacrificial system is no longer needed as Christ died once for all (Hebrews 9). The moral law remains in effect as it is a reflection of God's character, reminds us of our sinfulness, and guides us in how to live as God would have us live. He adds, *though not being myself under the law*. He didn't want them to think he was under the ceremonial law anymore or that he was lawless. Paul's law is the law of Christ. The rule of Jesus' teaching, love, and lordship. That's what he follows.

*To those under the law I became as one under the law.* To those still practicing the civic and ceremonial system (religiously Jews), I became one of them. I flexed to their beliefs as an evangelistic starting point. Where possible, he accommodated their religion so as to remove hindrances from their hearing of him. A couple examples:

- *Paul had Timothy circumcised to avoid offense (Acts 16:3)*
- *Participated in a Jewish purification ceremony to show he was not abandoning Old Testament law (Acts 21:20-26)*
- *When speaking to Jews, presented Jesus as Messiah from the Old Testament (Acts 9:20; 13:15ff.; 14:1)*

Some might say, "Paul was selling out." No. Paul was building bridges so as to build trust, establish a relationship, and earn a hearing.

This is obviously filled with challenges for us. How do you flex religiously to build a relationship with a Hindu? New Ager? Atheist? I would suggest looking for commonalities.

We have more in common with some than others. Maybe you use the sanctity of human life or human sexuality. Family points of agreement can be relational springboards to share the Christian story. When there is a relationship, there is some level of trust and hearing.

The advantage of religious unsaved people is that they are interested in spiritual things. Find those points of contact and talk about them in agreement long before you get to what you disagree with. We often do the opposite; right away we talk about what we don't agree on and immediately there is tension which rarely goes anywhere. This passage is more about relationship than presentation. Build the relationship. Respect them. Honor their culture and heritage. Earn the right to be heard.

### **Seeking the unsaved non-religious (Verse 21)**

*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.*

In the unsaved religious, to be *outside the law* means unfamiliarity with the Scriptures and Christianity. How do we approach these people? The same principle applies. *I become as one outside the law.* Become means relate. I relate to them where they are.

Outside the law is increasingly where our culture is. In decades gone by, there was a consensus of morality based on a Christian legacy in our culture. People lied, cheated, slept around, got drunk, and all the rest, but they felt as they did it, *I am not supposed to.* Today, there is no moral consensus or ethos. People lie, cheat, sleep around, get drunk but may do so outside the law. They do them and there is often no moral code (other than a conscience) whispering to them inwardly that they shouldn't. The moral code in a secular culture is without a transcendent standard. Have you ever wondered why people care so much about those Ten Commandments being around? Do you think if the Ten Commandments were reversed that anybody would have a problem with it? *You must take the Lord's name in vain. Dishonor your parents. Sleep with as many people as you can. Commit violence against one another. Lie whenever convenient.* If these were the commandments, they would hang on banners in every public venue in America.

The problem with the Ten Commandments is not that they are religious, it is that they are absolute. Pagans love outside absolutes. I think of that line from *Star Wars III: The Return of the Sith* where Obi-Wan and Anakin Skywalker are about to do battle. Obi-Wan says to Anakin, "Only Siths deal in absolutes!" Besides being an absolute statement, it summarizes a culture that demonizes any absolutes, even God's.

How do we become as those outside the law to reach those outside the law? That's a tough and complex question. Here's the principle, go where they are. Relate to who they are. They are outside the law and they want to stay there. We have to go to them and build bridges. Here are some: education, meals, family celebrations, pop culture, illness, death, financial need, family crisis, mutual interests and hobbies, national happy moments, national sad moments, religious holidays, marital trials, and on and on. All of these are relational bridge moments.

Non-religious people are people all the same; which means they are image-bearers with a longing for God, no matter how suppressed it might be. Our role is to build relational bridges starting with where they are.

## What We Expect our Missionaries to Do (Missions 101)

- *Love the People (Be with them)*
- *Live the Culture*
- *Talk the Language*
- *Reach the People*

An example close to my heart is my brother Scott who six years ago went to South America as a missionary to Paraguay. They developed a heart for the people. They moved to Costa Rica for a year of language school so they could communicate in the language of the culture. Then they moved to Paraguay and began to get to know Paraguayans. They learned the culture up close. They lived the culture, even some things they found personally distasteful, one of which is a cultural drink called Tedade. What is unpleasant isn't the taste but that everyone in the room drinks from the same straw – a straw that is rarely washed and used for years. To not drink is offensive. So they drink with smiles on their faces. Why? *By all means they might save some.* Culture itself provides bridges and relational opportunities for gospel ministry.

That's fine and dandy for Paul and missionaries in their culture, but what do we do?

## What We Expect of Ourselves in Our Culture

- *Love the People (Be with them)*
- *Live the Culture*
- *Talk the Language*
- *Reach the People*

This is what I am saying today. What is normal for missionaries in any culture should be normative for us in reaching our culture. Rather than be with the lost, we distance ourselves from them. Rather than live the culture, we create a counter-culture in the church and we live in our little bubble. The result is that few Christians can point to anyone that they have influenced toward gospel faith in the last five years.

Too often we think the starting point for outreach is us here, the church. I know because this feels safe to me too. But Paul doesn't say that he waited for the Jews to become like him so he could reach them, he became like them to reach them. Not in moral categories, but in relational ones. Who does the flexing in evangelism? It can only be us. Is your neighbor ever going to come over and say, "Hey, I see you're interested in Christianity so for the sake of a relationship with you, I'll be interested in Christianity too!"?

That will never happen. But if your neighbor is interested in fishing, get interested in fishing. If she is into Girl Scouts, buy cookies and talk Girl Scouts. If our community is discussing crime, flooding, school drop-out rates, high school football, or water pollution in Lake Michigan, be a part of the conversation. This is our mission field. Any decent missionary *loves the people, lives the culture, speaks the language and reaches the people.* We must do the same and *become all things to all people so that by all means we might save some.*

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