

Jesus Displayed

The Point: We can better share Jesus with others when we step into their shoes.

Session Passage: 1 Corinthians 9:16-27

Setting. The city of Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia and a major center of commerce and religion. It had been a Greek city-state until the Romans decimated it in 146 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt it in 44 B.C. as a Roman colony. Paul preached the gospel there, first to the Jews but also to Gentiles. He spent a year and half in Corinth successfully building a congregation (Acts 18:1-11). After leaving Corinth he received reports of major problems in the fellowship. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in Ephesus about A.D. 54 to address issues plaguing the Corinthian church.

1 Corinthians 9:16-18

Connection to the Point: Paul was compelled to share the gospel of Christ with others.

Context. Some people in the Corinthian church were critical of Paul. They even cast aspersions on his apostleship. One charge brought against him was that he was not exercising all the rights of an apostle including the right to financial support. Paul defended himself saying he did indeed have the right to receive compensation (1 Cor. 9:9-14), but did not exercise it so as not to hinder the advance of the gospel (vv. 12,16-18). Paul was not using the privileges he deserved as an apostle, nor was he writing to get the Corinthians to support him. He only wanted to boast that he was unselfishly serving them and the gospel.

Preach the gospel (v. 16). Paul's call from God was to boldly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated "gospel" means "good news." In 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, Paul precisely defined the term: "Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, *the gospel* I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:1-3, italics added).

No reason to boast (v. 16). To "boast" is to express exceptional pride in or glory in oneself. Or, as we might say, "bragging." Paul had stated that he only wanted to boast that he was not preaching the gospel for pay. He did not want to be accused of doing it for the wrong reason (though, ironically, some criticized him for not taking pay). In any case, he really had no reason to boast about it one way or the other.

Compelled to preach (v. 16). Why could Paul not boast about his preaching? Simply because he had nothing to boast about since it was not his choice to do it anyway. He was "compelled" (literally, "for necessity is laid upon me") to preach! God had saved him, a wretched sinner, called him to preach the gospel (Acts 22:21), and empowered him to do so. He could do no other but proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ that he himself had embraced (2 Cor. 5:14).

Woe to me (v. 16). "Woe" or "alas" is an expression of grief or denunciation. Paul declared that should he not carry out his calling to preach the gospel he would face divine judgment. The Lord Himself had chosen Paul to take the gospel to "Gentiles, kings, and Israelites" (Acts 9:15). Thus, he was obligated to keep proclaiming the gospel at all costs.

I have a reward (v. 17). Paul explained his reasoning for not taking pay. Paul suggested that if he were preaching the gospel because he simply wanted to do it willingly, then he would expect to get a reward. These are the natural wages a hired worker expects to receive for his labors.

Paul's reward was that he could preach the gospel "free of charge" (v. 18), without being paid to do so. His pay was no pay. "His reward in preaching was to give up his rights inherent in the gospel and to preach without charge."¹ He had the great privilege as a steward of Jesus Christ to be His messenger of the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. What could be more rewarding than that?

Entrusted with a commission (v. 17). Paul contrasted his willingness to preach the gospel because of his reward with him preaching it unwillingly because of his commission. A “commission” is a trust or stewardship. A steward was the manager of his master’s belongings. The steward owned nothing. Paul asserted that he was entrusted as a steward of the Lord’s gospel. He had no choice but to preach the gospel faithfully expecting nothing in return.

My rights in the gospel (v. 18). By taking nothing from those to whom he preached Paul was not taking full advantage of his rights as an apostle (vv. 9-15). Thus, no one could accuse him of abusing his power or authority for personal gain. He refused to do or take anything that might distract from the furtherance of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Connection to the Point: Paul sought to identify with whatever group he was trying to reach.

Slave (v. 19). Paul was a Jew and a Pharisee. He was also a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37-38). That meant he had certain rights and privileges (freedoms) that most people in the Roman Empire did not enjoy. Paul, therefore, could assert that he was “free from all” and “not anyone’s slave.” That is, he was not bound to any person, either personally or financially. Nonetheless, he had made himself “a slave to everyone.” A “slave” was someone who was accountable to and was the property of another person. Paul, of course, did not mean he had become everyone’s property, but metaphorically he had for the sake of Christ and the gospel given up his personal freedoms for the good of everyone to hear the gospel.

Win more people (v. 19). The purpose of Paul’s sacrifice of his freedom was to win more people to Christ through the gospel. He was more than willing to let go of his personal privileges to get opportunities to share the gospel with as many people as possible. He not only wanted to reach as many people as he could, but also as many kinds of people as he could. To do that Paul was willing to accommodate himself to the various cultural and religious environments in which he moved—but in doing so not compromising the gospel in any way. He now specified three such groups.

To the Jews (v. 20). Paul started with his own people group, the Jews. Paul was a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1) and a student of the rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Consequently, it was his normal practice to preach first in the synagogues in the towns to where he journeyed. Thus, he became like a Jew to win Jews to Christ.

The Jews were those living “under the law” of Moses. Paul had no problem conforming to the practices of Jewish traditions “like one under the law” when necessary if it furthered the winning of Jews to Jesus as their Messiah. He also did not wish to cause Jewish believers who still strictly kept the law to stumble because of him (18:18; 21:20-26). A good example of this principle was his decision to circumcise Timothy before taking him on as a fellow missionary of the gospel (16:3).

Paul immediately added a disclaimer to this statement. Parenthetically he wrote, “though I myself am not under the law.” He would, when necessary, keep the Jewish traditions to win those under the law, but he made it clear that in Christ he was not bound to keep the law himself (Rom. 7:1-6; Gal. 5:18).

Without the law (v. 21). The second group Paul mentioned were those “without the law.” He did not mean criminals or outlaws. In contrast to the Jews mentioned in the preceding verse, those “without the law” were the Gentiles. Gentiles naturally did not know or practice the law of Moses nor had any previous revelation from God. Nonetheless, when in Gentile cultures Paul would become “like one without the law” to win them to Christ as well.

The law of Christ (v. 21). Paul, however, interjected another disclaimer into this verse. He said he was still under the law of Christ. In other words, he abided by the higher moral standards reflective of a genuine follower of Jesus. He now lived ethically in the power of the Holy Spirit for the glory of Christ. “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:19-20; see also 5:1-25).

The weak (v. 22). The identity of this third group is debated, but it may hearken back to Paul’s admonishment in 8:1-13 to the more mature Corinthian believers not to cause young converts from pagan religions (the weak of conscience) to

stumble by eating food sacrificed to idols in the young converts presence. If this is the case, Paul was saying he became like the weak by refraining from eating pagan food sacrificed to idols to not hinder their growth in the faith.

All things to all people (v. 22). Paul summarized his work among all the groups. None of his rights were as important as his mission to win people to Christ and build them up in the faith.

Save some (v. 22). Paul's goal was to save some. The apostle realized that not everyone would receive his message positively. But he also knew that God's Spirit was already at work in the hearts of those He was preparing to hear the gospel and fall under conviction for repentance of their sins and faith in Christ.

Share in the blessings (v. 23). Paul did all for the sake of the gospel, not for his own self-satisfaction. Yet he desired to share, in partnership with others, in the blessings of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Connection to the Point: Sharing Jesus takes discipline and self-denial.

Runners in a stadium (v. 24). Paul posed rhetorical questions based on the metaphor of athletics. The metaphor would have resonated with the Corinthians. Sports contests were major events in ancient Greece. Near Corinth, the Isthmian Games, dedicated to the Greek god Poseidon, were held every two years. The games brought visitors and income to the city. So, Paul compared the Christian life to the running of a race.

The prize (v. 24). In the ancient games only the first-place winner got the prize. Usually, it was a wreath made only of flowers or pine straw placed upon the winner's head (there was no gold medal). It was a great honor and source of pride for the athlete and the athlete's city. In the case of Christianity, every person who repents and places faith in Christ receives an eternal inheritance in Christ (1 Pet. 1:3-7).

Run in such a way (v. 24). Paul urged the believers that they should run their race of faith with the same intensity as a sprinter in the games. Their goal was also to win a prize far more valuable than any wreath (or even a gold medal).

Everyone who competes (v. 25). Everyone who competed—strived or struggled—to win the race had to qualify for the Isthmian Games. An athlete had to certify that he had trained rigorously for ten months. This required strict self-control of diet and full commitment to a strenuous exercise routine.

Perishable crown . . . imperishable crown (v. 25). The winner of the foot race received the honor and glory of being a champion. But his material prize was a perishable [or corruptible] crown that would quickly wither, decay, and be discarded. However, Paul wrote in contrast, believers in Christ receive an imperishable [or incorruptible] crown. Paul did not elaborate further on the nature of this crown. Elsewhere Paul wrote of a crown: "There is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). Other passages in the New Testament refer to crowns: the crown of life (Jas. 1:12; Rev. 2:10) and the crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:4).

Runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air (v. 26). Paul continued his athletic analogy, now applying it to himself. He was not like a runner who was out of control not knowing where the finish line was located. Nor was he like a boxer who just flailed at his opponent in the ring never landing a punch or just shadow boxing at the wind. Paul ran with a specific goal in mind (spreading the gospel) and fought boldly against the enemies of the gospel!

Discipline my body (v. 27). The Greek term for "discipline" means to treat severely or wear out. This was strong language to describe the way Paul disciplined his body to "bring it under strict control." The apostle recognized the importance of keeping himself in good physical, spiritual, and moral condition, as well as having self-discipline, for the battle he waged for the gospel's sake.

Will not be disqualified (v. 27). Paul was not concerned about losing his salvation. Rather, his concern was living in such a way so that he did not stumble so as not to fulfill the mission Jesus had given him to preach the gospel. The apostle did not want to be found unworthy of the stewardship given to him as a servant of God.

1. Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 218.