

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

¹⁶You see, if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast about, because an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷If I do this as a volunteer, I receive compensation. But if not, I have been entrusted with a responsibility as a steward. ¹⁸What then is my compensation? To present the gospel of Christ free of charge when I preach it, instead of making use of the right I have when I preach the gospel.

¹⁹In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more. ²⁰To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those who are under the law. ²¹To those who are without the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God's law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law. ²²To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. ²³And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.

Who Are You?

I.

It all started with a very unflattering account, from our Christian point of view. He had a different name than the one we are most familiar with.

Originally he was violently opposed to Christianity, and I do mean *violently*. He was a persecutor of the Christian Church. He stood by and watched in approval as Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned to death. He dragged men and women who followed Christ off to prison. The book of Acts says that this Saul breathed out murderous threats against the disciples (Acts 9).

What a story he had! On the road to Damascus he had the kind of conversion experience that very few, indeed, can claim. Jesus himself appeared to Saul in a vision and called him away from unbelief to follow him. He became Paul, who had been called by Jesus himself to be an Apostle—the Apostle to the Gentiles, as he was known.

I would venture to say that none of us has ever known anyone quite like him. The biographical information about the Apostle Paul in Acts and all the autobiographical details he recorded in his letters paint an interesting picture of the man. He has often been called the “greatest missionary of all time.”

II.

Me? I didn't come from such an inauspicious beginning, nor do I have such a biography or autobiography. I had Christian parents. They were very strong in their faith and very involved in the church. When they didn't like the way the doctrine of their brand of Lutheranism was going, they sought a church that remained true and steadfast to what the Bible says. They found the Wisconsin Synod brand of Lutheranism, and there they made their home.

While my family and I changed “brands” of Lutheranism, I certainly can't remember a time when I wasn't a Christian. I was baptized early on. While my town didn't have a Lutheran elementary school, my mother, a former Lutheran school teacher, and my father, both made every effort to make sure I was well-versed in Christian education.

The time came when I began to study for the ministry. My pastor thought that I would make an adequate pastor some day, but I, after a time, became discouraged and disillusioned and quit. I joined the army. My pastor was disappointed. He said: "If the Lord wants you, he'll drag you kicking and screaming, if necessary." He said it with a smile on his face, as if he knew.

Who are *you*? What is *your* background? Perhaps most of you have a similar background. Not the pastor part, since none of those I see in person today are pastors. But perhaps the part about not remembering a time when you were not a Christian. Perhaps the part about having parents who made every effort to make sure you were well-versed in your Christian education. Maybe you even went to our Lutheran elementary school.

Perhaps some of you came to faith in Jesus later in life, like the Apostle Paul. Not as dramatically maybe, since you weren't blinded by the light on the road to Damascus, but becoming a believer in Jesus totally changed your life, none-the-less.

No matter what your back story, who are you?

III.

"I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some" (1 Corinthians 9:22, EHV).

Who was Paul, I suppose we could ask. He says he became all things to all people.

"To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews" (1 Corinthians 9:20, EHV). As someone of Jewish descent, this probably seemed a natural to Paul's readers. Perhaps they had to do the same kind of double-takes we sometimes do when they got to the next part of the verse.

"To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those who are under the law" (1 Corinthians 9:20, EHV). Jewish people who still followed Judaism kept the Ceremonial Law. These were the laws that governed their worship, but it was a little more wide ranging than we might think of for worship regulations. They had to pray in a certain way and at certain times. They had to bring sacrifices. They couldn't just choose which day of the week they were going to worship on, it was mandated by the Ceremonial Law—sundown on Friday evening to sundown on Saturday evening. They had to follow all kinds of dietary restrictions meticulously.

Paul, now that he was a Christian, was free from all these Ceremonial Laws. But if it would give him a way to start a conversation with a Jewish person, he would follow their dietary rules and do other things required by the Ceremonial Law in order to have a chance to reach them with the gospel.

Now another passage that makes us do a double take. "To those who are without the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God's law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law" (1 Corinthians 9:21, EHV). The Gentiles *seemed* to be free from the law. They did not have the Ceremonial Law of the Jews. Moral Law was just a formality; they didn't really understand it, and whatever parts of it they followed, it was only for the purpose of fitting in with society. While Paul did not engage in immoral talk or immoral behavior just to be like them, neither did he have to follow the dietary restrictions of the Ceremonial Law or any of its other rules, since they no longer apply to the Christian. He could do many things to fit in with the Gentiles so that he could start a conversation about Jesus with them, just like he could with the Jews.

“To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak” (1 Corinthians 9:22, EHV). Remember those discussions of Christian freedom and what we might choose to do or not do in that freedom? Paul says that he would choose whatever it was that allowed him to continue to strengthen those weak in faith. In no way did he want his freedom to cause someone weak in faith to wander off the path.

I have known some people—pastors, even—whose story of coming to faith is much more dramatic than mine. They point to their journey of faith as a lesson to others. Paul did the same thing. To Timothy he wrote: “I was shown mercy for this reason: that in me, the worst sinner, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his unlimited patience as an example for those who are going to believe in him, resulting in eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:16, EHV). God is merciful. God is patient. There is hope, even for the worst of sinners.

Because of it, Paul was freed to serve others with the gospel. He said: “I have been entrusted with a responsibility as a steward” (1 Corinthians 9:17, EHV). What was really important to him was that others have the opportunity to hear the precious news of what Jesus did. While *Paul* got it in dramatic fashion on the road to Damascus, the same message of freedom in Jesus was available for all and intended for all. His responsibility was to proclaim it.

IV.

None of us will ever get the moniker “The greatest missionary of all time,” as Paul has. None of us has the same conversion story.

None of us has the same depth of sin. Oh, wait, we do. Every one of us can say with Paul that we are the worst sinners. Every single, solitary sin deserves eternal punishment in hell.

God loved each one of us in exactly the same way he loved the Apostle Paul. God sent the same Jesus to live, die, and rise again for each one of us. The same Jesus has ascended into the same heaven to prepare a place for you and me in the same way he prepared a place for Paul. One day each of us will be around the same throne at the feet of the same Lamb who reigns praising our Savior for the great things he has done for us.

“You see, if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast about, because an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16, EHV). Who are you? You are part of the same family of God as I am, as Paul is, as every Christian before you and every Christian who will ever live.

Preach the gospel. It doesn’t have to be a scary thing. You proclaim the gospel when you tell it to your children. You preach the gospel when you quietly show those who have strayed that Jesus is still of utmost importance to you.

As Paul did, you and I can choose to be servants of Christ, boldly confessing Jesus to others. We can be all things to all people, putting aside those matters of Christian freedom that might present a stumbling block to someone who is weak.

Say with Paul: “I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some.²³ And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others” (1 Corinthians 9:22-23, EHV). Amen.