

9.6.09

By All Means Save Some

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

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Well obviously we are sorry that Kevin, Allison, Jessamine, and Brennan are returning home to western Pennsylvania in December, but we totally understand the opportunity at Camp Judson is one that is a good fit with Kevin's abilities and experience and one that has ties to his family. I am personally grateful for the nine years that Kevin and I have worked and served together here at BBC. He has been a faithful, loyal, intelligent, and helpful part of our staff and I know that there are many young people and their parents who can testify to how Kevin has helped them or their friends. One parent wrote of Kevin this week after hearing the news: *"I think of the troubled kids that my girls introduced you to – and how you welcomed and enveloped them - in Youth Group, Friday hang-outs, trips, your house, etc., - and made them feel safe, loved, "heard," understood, and offered them a foundation to begin to repair and rebuild their lives, and a springboard to grow and develop their faith. I think of looking at high school yearbooks and seeing your name mentioned again and again by kids whose lives you've impacted."* I can also tell you that in the office and in worship Kevin has solved more computer, printer, sound, and other technological related matters than you can imagine. He will be missed.

One thing that is important in working at a church and as part of pastoral team is being theologically compatible. That is not too important in most working environments but it is at a church. Kevin understands the importance of trying to reach people who are not yet Christians or a part of the church and he has always supported our efforts to reach out and do things in the community and with unchurched folks.

One pastor who I speak with regularly about ministry has been having a really rough time with a couple key people in his church who have basically been fighting against every initiative that would bring the church to the community or the community into the church – whether temporarily hosting an Al-Anon group that lost its space in a local hospital during renovations or serving a community meal. The problem of church folks forgetting what the church is supposed to be all about is not a new one. Churches and individuals can get focused in on issues or things they care about and forget or neglect the larger and first purpose of why a church does anything – to save, transform, love, and serve people for God's sake. Frequently in the New Testament Jesus and Paul remind their audiences of the importance of reaching and saving people.

This is the case in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 where Paul says,

“For though I am **free** with respect to all, I have made my self a **slave** to all,
so 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 I myself am not under the law)

so that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law
(though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law)

so that I might win those outside the law.

To the weak I became weak,

so that I might win the weak,

I have become all things to all people,

that I might by all means save some.

I do it all for the sake of the gospel,

so that I may share in its blessings.”

In this passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul states the essential position of a Christian – we are to use our God-given freedom not to indulge our own will and desires, but to imitate Jesus in sacrificially loving and serving others. In Galatians 5:13-14, Paul concisely makes the point, “*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, **but through love become slaves to one another.***” Jesus was free to do what he chose to do. He used his freedom not to assert but to give up his rights, power, and position and gave of him self sacrificially right up to the point of dying on the cross. Many of us, no matter how long we have been following Jesus, find this kind of self-lowering humility, very difficult to do even in a much less demanding way, if we try to practice it at all.

This pattern of using our freedom to become slaves of Jesus and to serve others is demonstrated in Paul’s life from the time he surrenders himself to the leadership of Jesus. Disciples of Jesus, members of churches, give up their rights and take up their responsibilities. For Paul, this meant “*doing it all for the sake of the gospel.*” Everything Paul does is aimed at winning as many people as possible to the gospel.

Every decision a church makes should be run through this simple filter -

Will this decision, this choice, this activity, this group help us reach people?

Paul was constantly traveling and dealing with different customs, cultures, habits, and religious beliefs. Paul says he is free with respect to all – to Jews, those under the Law or outside the law, the weak, but he has been willing to accommodate himself, becoming all things to all people so that by all means he might save some. Do you know what a chameleon is? Chameleons are tree dwelling lizards that have the ability to change colors and to move each eye independently. Paul is basically encouraging Christians to be like chameleons, to have the ability to adapt to our surroundings without changing the essence of who we are. Whether a chameleon appears green while on a leaf or brown on a tree trunk, it is still a chameleon, its nature is the same. It adapts to its circumstances.

In a spiritual sense, this is an issue some of us may need to wrestle with – how may we need to adapt our own strongly held opinions in order to pursue the most important goal of saving people? Certainly Paul is strong-willed and opinionated but he is willing to adapt, his behavior and attitude, not his message, any way he can to achieve that end. Paul gives some examples of his willingness to adapt his behavior in verses 20-22, the first three having to do with Jew/Gentile, or we might say today church/unchurched issues. For Paul who was Jewish to say he became “as a Jew,” shows how strongly he understood his position as a follower of Jesus to transcend every other defining allegiance in his life. Paul states he is not under the law and he not only resisted the imposition of Jewish Law on Gentiles, he also adopted a casual attitude about the law, such as kosher observance when he was among Gentiles. Paul looks to overcome cultural and ethnic divisions in order to bring all sorts of people into the one community of faith in Jesus.

Paul endured the hardship of opposition, beatings, imprisonments, the disloyalty and abandonment of colleagues, the challenge of fund raising, and conflict with people both inside and outside the church. Paul endures all of it for the sake of sharing the good news of God’s love in Jesus with others. Paul constantly adapts his behavior and the form of his message, but not the essential content, in whatever way necessary to reach as many people as possible with the good news of God’s love in Jesus. What does that imply for us - for our discipleship, our service, our sharing of the gospel, our attitude? It means every single thing that happens or is done in church may not be the way we would do it, but if it helps others come to faith or grow in faith then we can support it.

This scripture is one of my top ten passages in shaping my philosophy of ministry. At BBC we have and will continue to adapt our behavior and forms in order that we may by all means save some people and share in the blessings of the gospel. We have different styles of worship at different times so that we may win as many people as we can. That is why we use a screen and the latest technology – can you imagine what Paul would have done with the tools we have today to reach people with the gospel?

Being free from the Law does not mean Paul can run wild with self-indulgence. Instead his obligation to God comes now from his relationship with Jesus rather than the Law. He has made himself, a free man, a slave to all. We who are free, when we're called to follow Jesus, become, Paul says, slaves of Christ. We do it so that as we are being saved, God can also use us to save some other people.

The 1993 film *Schindler's List* won seven Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Director for its portrayal of the story of Oskar Schindler, a German entrepreneur, who first exploits but later, protects Jews in Poland during World War Two. When the Jews are forced into the ghetto, Schindler employs them at his kitchenware factory. This arrangement is beneficial for both Schindler, who gets cheap labor, and the Jews, who are protected from being sent to concentration camps. When the Nazis close Poland's Cracow ghetto, Jews are sent either to death camps or a labor camp at Plaszow. At Plaszow, many workers die, and those who are not productive are transferred to nearby Auschwitz.

When the Germans begin retreating from the Eastern Front, Schindler begins manufacturing faulty artillery for the German army. Disillusioned with the Nazi party, Schindler conspires with his Jewish accountant, Itzhak Stern, to employ Jews from Plaszow, hence saving them from extermination.

When Germany finally surrenders, Schindler knows he is a wanted man for wrongly using Jewish people as slave labor. As he prepares to flee, Schindler is surrounded by over 1,000 Jews whose lives he saved.

Looking at the faces of the people he saved, Schindler is overwhelmed by the sudden recognition that his extravagant spending, the money he threw away, the costly possessions he kept and tried so hard to preserve are absolutely meaningless and worthless compared to the value of saving even one person. Even with all his flaws, Schindler had done a great deed in saving so many. At the time the film was released in

1993 there were only about 4,000 Jews left in all of Poland, but there were more than 6,000 descendants of Schindler's Jews in Europe, the United States, and Israel.

When we find ourselves at the gates of heaven, God may ask us who else is being saved because of our friendship, our service, our sharing, our hospitality, our giving, our love, our sacrifice, or our prayers. Will there be people who will crowd around us, hugging us, because of what we've been willing to do to save others? We can't take gold or cars or church buildings or any other possessions to heaven, but we can take people. God so loved the world he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

We demonstrate our love when we become all things to all people so that we may by all means save some because as Itzhak Stern quoting from the Talmud, in Schindler's List, said, *"Whoever saves one life saves the world entire."*