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 October 7, 2007

**GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS**  
 #23

**SELF-CONTROL FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL**  
**1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-27**

**INTRODUCTION**

Paul is wrapping up his defense of his own Apostleship. The Corinthians called Paul's authority into question for a number of reasons. First of all, Paul refused to impress them; he simply preached the cross and its implications. Secondly, he refused a salary. Thirdly, he often made concessions, giving up his right to enjoy his freedom in Christ, depending on what cultural group he was among. This third reason is what is addressed in 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. The point of this passage is Paul's concluding explanation of why he practiced such rigorous self-control for the sake of the gospel.

**1. PAUL'S GOAL IS TO WIN MORE PEOPLE TO JESUS (9:19)**

One feature of Paul's life that leaps out at us is his consuming desire to *win more [people]* (v19). He is willing to do all he can to at least *save some* (v22). Everything he does is *for the sake of the gospel* (v23). This goal is going to determine his life strategy which is laid out in part in verses 20-23. Paul fully understands his freedom in Christ, but exercising those freedoms is not his primary goal; living the cross is his goal. Paul wants to put a living example of Jesus in front of the Corinthians. He wants to proclaim and live the cross in such a way that the gospel becomes attractive to unbelievers, legalistic believers, and believers who live too loosely whether from a Jewish or Gentile background. In short, he wants to win all of these to Jesus and to a deeper level of grace that frees us from both oversensitive consciences and enslaving sins. Paul is willing to set aside his rights, but not simply for the sake of setting aside those rights. He does this with a larger goal in mind and that is the advancement of the gospel. That explains why at certain times, Paul would insist on his rights [See Acts 22:22-29]. When Paul saw that upholding his rights would advance the gospel, he would exercise his rights. When limiting those rights would advance the gospel, he would refrain from lawful behavior.

**2. PAUL'S STRATEGY IS TO BE FLEXIBLE ENOUGH TO MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE (9:20-23)**

Paul's goal was proclaiming and modeling a clear example of Jesus in such a way that unbelievers find the gospel attractive. He developed a fairly straightforward strategy to accomplish that goal; he would become flexible enough to *fit in and further the gospel anywhere* (D.A. Carson's phrase). Obviously, this strategy did not include indulging in sinful behavior. But it most certainly involved adapting to various groups with differing convictions so that he could present Jesus to that particular group. He refused to maintain a weak conscience [he fully understands the freedom the believer possesses in Christ]. He refused to be controlled by others, even though he will make concessions for the gospel's advancement.

More specifics of Paul's strategy are laid out for us in verses 20-23. First of all, Paul knows his freedom in Christ. He knows he is free from the Old Covenant [Mosaic Covenant] demand of the

law (v20). But he also knows that he must still be governed by God's law; that specifically being *the law of Christ* (v21). Paul must do everything that Jesus commanded him to do and that is primarily demonstrated by loving God and loving others in the way that desires to see their souls saved. Galatians 6:2 says *Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ*. Jesus commanded those who are free to serve those who are not yet free in order to advance the gospel (vv22-23).

Secondly, Paul knows that not all share this knowledge and they live according to their ignorance. In other words, they are *under law* (v20); they continue to try to win God's favor by observing certain rituals, ceremonies, dietary laws, etc. And others are ignorant of any law at all. They are *without law* (v21).

We can summarize this strategy as Paul's plan to love others the way Jesus loved him. Jesus entered into our world to bear our weaknesses. He demonstrated patience and kindness toward us. When Paul deals with the weak, the confused, the stubborn and the foolish, he wants to serve them the way Christ served him.

To say with Paul, *I have become all things to all men* (v22), requires a thorough knowledge of what God allows and what He forbids. Such knowledge is required but we can easily err and become man-pleasers rather than God-pleasers. *I have become all things to all men* means that within the laws of Christ, I have become as flexible as possible to advance the gospel into as many cultural settings as possible to win as many as possible.

### **3. PAUL'S GOAL AND STRATEGY REQUIRE A SELF-CONTROL THAT IS ESSENTIAL FOR OTHER'S SALVATION AND HIS OWN (9:23-27)**

Obviously this lifestyle requires a healthy amount of self-control. Self-control is the ability to properly order your life in order to reach your goal. For example, Paul points to an athlete who longs for *the prize* (v24). The athlete knows what he wants more than anything in the world, the prize that comes with winning. In response to the deepest desire of his heart, he orders his life in accordance with his desire; that is a clear example of self-control. Having a clear goal, his desires are properly ordered to accomplish the goal he longs after.

When our desire is to advance the gospel as far as possible, then our lives will be ordered well enough to do that. So our greatest need is a new heart that possesses this kind of desire. That's why Paul ties his own salvation to this kind of self-control (v23 & v27). It's not that developing self-control saves us, but we must have a new heart with desires that have been ordered by the Spirit of God. And when God has given this new heart at regeneration, we must be like Paul. *26Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; 27but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.*

Developing this kind of self-control is essential to persevering in the faith. Once we are justified and our salvation is forever secured, we must fight to have these new hearts properly ordered according to the law of Jesus. When they are ordered by Spirit-given self-control, our deepest desires will allow us to order our lives so that the gospel reaches others in spite of their foolish superstitions and hang-ups. Paul sees his obedience as essential to his final salvation (v27). If he ceases to order his life in accordance with an overwhelming desire to glorify Jesus and love others, then he will be disqualified, cast away as a sham [*For years, Marion Jones angrily denied*

*using steroids. On Friday, she admitted it was all a lie....She had vehemently denied all doping allegations, even issuing this emphatic declaration in 2004: "I have never, ever used performance-enhancing drugs... The statute of limitations on doping cases is generally eight years, which would put Marion Jones' five medals (three golds and two bronzes) at the 2000 Sydney Olympics in jeopardy. She could also lose medals from the World Championships in 2001.]*

In verse 27, Paul is saying something like this; "In spite of my amazing testimony of how I came to meet Jesus and in spite of all I have done thus far, if I cease to practice Spirit-led discipline and instead, give in to my base impulses which remain in the members of my body, and I never repent, I will be a cast away." Paul is not fearful of this becoming reality; he knows Christ has taken hold of him. But he also knows that this guarantees his continued fighting against sin and specifically, a lack of self-control [See James 2:24]. Perseverance in faith is God's promise to us and our responsibility to appropriate [See Luke 13:24, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Galatians 6:9, Philippians 3:12, Titus 2:14 & Hebrews 6:11]. The promise of the gospel is that our sins are forgiven and the Spirit gives us a new heart, a reordered heart that will provide self-control for our bodies.

### **CONCLUSION**

The kind of person who can *become all things to all men* is the kind of person who has a new heart. Our old hearts do not find this kind of gospel-centered flexibility appealing. Our old hearts cry out for our rights; those hearts fight to maintain their rights. Those old hearts are too easily offended when we observe others who are different from us. And those old hearts are motivated almost exclusively by self-love, not love for other's souls. Even self-control is a matter of the heart and not just the will. We must feel the value of souls being won before we will radically adjust our lives to advance the gospel. The gospel addresses the problem of old, dead hearts by providing us with new hearts. If our old hearts were sufficient to please the Lord, then we would not need new ones. But we desperately need new hearts that love as Jesus loved. And even those new hearts are in constant need of renewal. So pray that this word, given to us by the Holy Spirit, will be the source of your new heart or renewed heart so that you can be free in Christ while becoming all things to all men.

Our hearts are renewed by the Holy Spirit as we look to Jesus in the Scriptures. Matthew 26:47-56 gives us the clearest illustration of self-control. Jesus could have called 12 legions of angels to deliver him from those who came to crucify him and yet his goal is that the Scriptures be fulfilled (26:54).