
Faithful Flexibility & Directed Discipline

A look at a lifestyle reflecting good stewardship of the gospel

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Dan Turner

Introduction

Whether you have the gospel but no one to talk to or you have relationships but no gospel – either way you are failing to be a good steward of the message entrusted to you. This morning's message is to make plain a lifestyle reflective of being a good steward of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do you find yourself growing in knowledge of the gospel but not growing in friendships with unbelievers? You are able to think clearly upon the aspects of the gospel. Your insights into the Scriptures are keen. Your ability to follow a theological argument is strong. YET, you have no significant friendships with those who need to be saved. If this is you then today's message is for you (relationships).

Or, do you find yourself with close friends who are unbelievers. You are liked by them. You thoroughly enjoy sharing common interests with your unsaved friends. You consider them some of your best friends. YET, your life looks no different from them. Your values and ways mirror theirs. You have unbelieving friends but no message. If this is you then today's message is for you (righteousness).

What, then, is the solution?

Please take out your Bibles and turn with me to 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. This morning we want to think together about our responsibilities to share the gospel with those who do not know Jesus Christ as their master and savior. We desire to provide each of you with instruction and application needed to become good stewards of the message entrusted to you.

This message is the third in a series titled Stewardship. The aim of the Elders with this series is simple. We want each of us to understand that we are responsible and accountable to be good stewards of God's gifts. He has entrusted us with much. The question before us is: Are we faithful with what He has given us?

It is my desire that as a result to this morning's message, we will be able to strike a balance between these two sides; separation and assimilation; between never mixing with unbelievers and being so absorbed in their lifestyles that we become like two peas in a pod. When we slip down either side of these extremes, we fail to be good stewards of the grace of life.

In 1Corinthians 9:19-27, Paul models the third way to effective stewardship of the message ; faithful flexibility and directed discipline; both of which are indispensable for maturity in stewardship of the gospel. We will take a look at both ways this morning as we see them in 1Cor.9:19-27. [read passage]

Paul's argument

To get to vv.19-27, one must go through vv.1-18. Follow along as I read vv.1-3.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who would examine me.

In chapter nine, we step into a vehement argument for the authenticity of Paul's apostolic authority. Is Paul a valid apostle? Should the church in the first century obey his writings? In light of some in the church questioning his authority, Paul lays before the church a defense for the validity of his ministry.

To reconstruct the situation, we could organize the passage like this:

In v.4-18...

Their charge

"Paul, you do not have any authority because you do not even get paid".

Paul's defense:

"I freely forego a paycheck for the advancement of the gospel."

In v.19-27...

Their argument:

"You do not have any authority Paul because you waver"

Paul's defense:

"I freely become all things to all people that I might win as many as possible".

Paul's authority derived from the call of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus was not to be brought into question. His heart was genuine. His message was pure. He was for real. This is why they (and we) must pay close attention to what he says and how he lives. So, what did he say and how did he live? Answers to these questions are what we will focus on in this

message; a message aimed at helping us become better stewards of the message of Jesus Christ.

Listen as I continue to read. Vv.19-27

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. Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Paul's flexible & disciplined evangelism

Paul models flexible and disciplined evangelism. Both sides of evangelism, I will be arguing, are needed to break through barriers which may keep the gospel from the lost. Paul's lifestyle demonstrates how we can avoid the extremes. On the one hand, if we are not flexible in our lifestyles we will inevitably become isolated and withdrawn; people with the message but no audience. We will not have any unbelieving friends. We will retreat into our holy huddles and comfortable cliques with no impact on those who currently are under the very wrath of God (cf. Jn.3:36). *Without real contact there will be no real impact.*

And yet, on the other hand, if we are not disciplined in our pursuit of holiness, we will inevitably become indistinguishable from the world. We will conform to the pattern of this world, our claim to the benefits of the cross sound hollow and effective evangelism comes to an end. *Without biblical sanctification there will be no biblical communication.*

With these high stakes in view, look with me briefly at Paul. From Vv.19-23 we can see at least three aspects of Paul's Faithful Flexibility in his evangelistic lifestyle. All of these aspects are imbedded in the metaphor of a servant. He says in v.19 "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant of all that I might win more of them". He is so eager to win the lost that he will be a servant of people.

A Faithful Flexibility

Aspects of servanthood

1. **Freely:** The first aspect of being a servant can be seen in v.19. “I made myself a servant” tells us that for Paul being a servant of people for the sake of the gospel is no effort. He freely does this. There is no begrudging attitude. There is no internal restraint forcing him through guilt or whatever to pick up the towel and serve rebellious, hardened, unbelievers. It is his joy. It is his delight to be an instrument in the redeemer’s hand.
2. **Flexible:** The second aspect of being a servant can be seen in vv.20-22. Paul lists different groups in which he demonstrates flexibility in adapting himself to blend in to their culture. To a Jew he became kosher. To the Gentile he became like them though not sinning to do so. He rounds off this list with the weak. As we trace this term back to chapter one, it appears that Paul is referring to the poor and uneducated. His point here is that he crosses socio-economic barriers and becomes like them in order to win them over to Christ.
3. **Focused on the goal:** Lastly, the aspect we see in vv.22b-23 relates to focus or perspective. His attention living in a fallen world for the sake of Christ is fixed upon the goal. And what is the goal we see in these vv.? It runs in two directions though not in tension with one another. We see the goal of his priorities and activities is to win by all means possible some unbelievers to Christ. My brothers and sisters, this verse is peerless in relation to our efforts in evangelism here at the Chapel. Oh, how I desire all of us to adopt this perspective on life. To be so single in passion that all we do is for the sake of the lost will radically impact our neighborhoods and utterly change the look of the Chapel. And all this for the multiplication of the manifestation of the glory of God!

Paul focuses his life not only on saving souls but notice v.23. He understands that to orient his life around this goal is outright favorable for him. He sees no tension between a radically self-denying passion for the sake of unbelievers’ salvation and a radically self-interest passion for the sake of personal enjoyment of the blessings of God. The two passions unite; a passion for lost souls and a passion to be eternally happy. This is the focus Paul has that kept him persevering to the end.

To defend his apostolic authority, Paul has been laboring to demonstrate that he is a faithful man. He writes this section to show that he is a model of a good steward of the message of Jesus Christ (see 1Cor. 9:17 & 11:1) He did this by showing the church what his lifestyle is about; namely it is about winning souls to Jesus Christ. And he does this through a flexible and focused lifestyle.

A Directed Discipline

He continues his argument but now with a different vantage point. He wants them to see that even when he is adapting to his culture and surroundings, he is ruthless in his pursuit of holiness. And this aspect of evangelism we are calling A Directed Discipline.

Aspects of an athlete

In vv.24-27, Paul shifts metaphors from servant to athlete. In his day and in city of Corinth particularly they were accustomed to the Isthmian Games; second in stature only to the Olympics. And so, the church would follow the imagery well.

Paul strongly desires himself and the church to assimilate into the culture of those whom they evangelize. But he is even more vehement that this adaptation of lifestyle not take the church into compromise. His thoughts are mainly about dining at cultic meals at the pagan temples. His concern is mainly idolatry (see 10:14) And so, in chapter 10 he will come out and forbid them to participate in the activity of eating meat sacrificed to idols at the pagan temples when they are celebrating their polytheism. He wants them to get and stay pure while at the same time staying in contact with unbelievers. To do that he illustrates his life to them through a word picture. In this word picture of an athlete we can see at least three aspects helpful to run in such a way that they will obtain the final prize; the salvation of their souls.

1. **Strenuous:** To explain what it takes to be involved in flexible and disciplined evangelism Paul highlights the nature of this discipline. Vv. 24-25 tell the church that this radical lifestyle is arduous, taxing, demanding, exhausting at times. It is nothing short of STRENUOUS. His only command found in this paragraph is in v.24; “so run” – He is telling them, and God is telling us, that there is no such thing as loitering in the Christian journey. There is no such category of coasting or loafing around. The Christian life (particularly when we enter into other people’s culture) is a laborious discipline to stay clear of idolatry and ultimate ruin.
2. **Self-control:** Paul lists another aspect to Directed Disciplined Evangelism. We can pick that out from v.25. “Self-control” and thoughts like it are interwoven throughout this paragraph. He tells the church that a life of self-denying is non-optional for those who will make it to the end and so win the prize of eternal joy. As an athlete, denying certain fleeting enjoyments were part of the 10-month training schedule. They understood that to win the prize they had to forfeit some good things in order to gain the better things. And so it is with us. To survive; nay, to thrive in evangelism we must understand that the greater joys to be experienced come to those who submit to a self-denying regimen. To stay pure in an impure surrounding we must adopt a self-controlled lifestyle.
3. **Sees the goal:** Lastly, Paul lists the third aspect under being an athlete. This is seen in vv.26-27. To maintain radical difference from the world when ministering in the world we must have a discipline that is strenuous, self-controlled and lastly sees the goal. Paul saw the prize for which he was stretching. He also saw it in the negative. V. 27 tells us that Paul saw himself as a candidate for losing eternal joy should he not be like this athlete. This is not to say that for Paul he thought that his eternal security was bound up in his undaunted self-determination. Paul had all the confidence in the Sovereign God who

is faithful (cf. 1:8; 10:13). And one of the ways the Sovereign God perseveres people like Paul (and like you and me) is to make us feel real warnings. And we come across one of these staggering warnings in v.27.

Paul's disciplined evangelism, to keep himself from the entanglements of the world, was strenuous, self-denying and sees the goal. What more do we need for counsel than Paul's example.

Lessons

1. Be flexible in conscience when it comes to non-moral issues.

The Bible tells us that each of us is susceptible to being weak in our conscience (see 8:7). We are never to go against our conscience (see 8:10,11). But that does not mean that we are to stay weak in our conscience (see 8:4-6). Learn how to make distinctions between moral and non-moral issues (see Rom.12:1-2). For example, is it a moral issue to go to the Cinema, drink a beer, enjoy sporting events, pierce an ear, listen to music without Christian lyrics, hanging out with immoral people, etc?

This charge is not to be taken lightly. It can be dangerous (cf. 6:12). Talk with your elder(s). Never, ever go against your conscience; for that would be sin. Yet, don't be afraid of culture. Listen to your elders' teaching on the moral will of God (see a summary of this teaching in Garry Friesen's book *Decision Making and the will of God*; chapter 26 called *Weaker Brothers, Pharisees and Servants*; pp.395-419). Think rigorously and carefully over what issues and activities are cultural and what are biblical. Live life in Christ with an aim to winning others to Christ with your God-given freedom from Christ.

2. Be flexible in other people's interests and backgrounds.

The issue around which this message centers is the reordering of priorities that reflect Christ himself (a friend of sinners). It is not that we do not have time for irreligious folks. Rather, we schedule them right out of our lives. We would rather enjoy our own interests and spend time with those who reflect our own backgrounds. Are we in over with our own interests? Can we see that there is greater joy in participating in other people's interests for the sake of their souls rather than enjoying merely what we enjoy? Are there attitudes and actions from which we need to repent?

3. Be flexible in order to enjoy the blessings of the gospel.

Reread 1Corinthians 9:23 and allow the logic of this verse to shape your lifestyle. Go whole-heartedly after the blessings found in a flexible and disciplined lifestyle of evangelism. Grow in joy! Develop your delight as you reorganize your schedule and spend time with unbelievers for their salvation. The flexible and disciplined lifestyle of evangelism described in this passage is a means of great blessings – for the evangelist! Don't miss the blessings offered you by not heeding this message and changing in your priorities and relationships.

4. Be disciplined in your pursuit of holiness among pagan culture.

If the first three lessons about flexibility were about getting us into the lives of the lost the last three lessons about discipline are about keeping us safe in the midst of the lost. According to Chapter 8:9-13, one having a weak conscience in a certain area can become vulnerable to the sin of those around him/her. (See also 8:7 & 6:12). We are called to pursue holiness. Be like an athlete who trains for his sport; Strenuous is a characteristic of one who pursues holiness in the midst of irreverence and immorality. Exhausting, arduous and tiring can be (and most the time is) our fight against sin and for faith, hope and love. Never give up beloved! Enter an unbeliever's life with vigilance over your own heart; lest you be tempted and swayed into sin. (cf. 6:12)

5. Be disciplined to forgo good things to gain the better things.

Another aspect of a disciplined life of evangelism has to do with self-control. As an athlete, we must forgo certain things. Winning requires discipline even for the best of athletes. Paul applies the metaphor to their – and our – situation. To enter into people's lives safely we need to be cautious. For the Corinthians, they actually had to forego some things altogether because they were inherently incompatible with the Christian life. According to 10:14-22, they were prohibited to go to the community outings at the pagan temples and eat the cultic meals. Prostitution and idolatry were common at these meals. The Christian was not permitted to "hang out" at these temples. The meat at the temple was choice. The camaraderie at the outings was good. They had to forgo these good things in order to enjoy something better – namely holiness. Are there places and activities at which you would succumb to sin? Even under the goal of evangelism this message tells you to be self-controlled and stay out!

6. Be disciplined in order to heed the dangers of the gospel.

We are not playing with toy guns. Stakes are high. Eternity is in view. The last aspect of a directed discipline in a lifestyle of evangelism has to do with a warning. This warning is real. Genuine Christians feel genuine warnings. For Paul, he certainly sensed the grave danger should he not heed the warning. We too as we grow in evangelism must take to heart this last lesson. We long to associate with unbelievers. We understand that without contact there will be no impact. Nevertheless, the Bible commands us to pursue holiness and watch over our hearts with all diligence. Love the lost while at the same time you love the LORD. Share in holiness as you share your life with those perishing. In other words, stay clear of idolatry as to stay close to idolaters. We cannot have one or the other. We must have BOTH.

(Reiterate the lessons and then quote 10:31)



Stewardship our message to the world

1Corinthians 9:19-27

Dan Turner

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