

All Things To All Men

1 Corinthians 8:1-9:27

Key Verse: 9:22

“To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”

In this passage Paul teaches us how to use Christian freedom. This freedom is a precious gift of Jesus Christ. It delights our souls and gives us great joy. However, if we do not use it properly, we will stumble. Some people have compared living in Christian freedom to walking down a narrow path with a ditch on each side. As long as we stay on the path, we can be happy and prosper spiritually. But if we fall into either ditch we have big problems. On one side, the ditch is legalism which reduces Christianity to a list of dos and don'ts that robs its vitality. On the other side, the ditch is syncretism, which combines Christian faith with anything and everything, until it loses its distinctive and supreme place. To succumb to either legalism or syncretism deprives us of our freedom. Today Paul teaches how to use freedom properly to build a healthy Christian community.

I. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (8:1-13)

Thus far in his letter, Paul has answered various questions about Christian life. Now he turns to the matter of food sacrificed to idols. In doing so, Paul really addresses the issue of how to use freedom in a Christian community. We should not think about Paul's words only on an individual level, but in the context of Christian fellowship. Look at verse 1. "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Idol worship was a part of Corinthian culture. In order to worship Greek and Roman

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gods, the Corinthians went to the temple to offer animal sacrifices. The meat of the sacrifices was later sold in the marketplace. Often it was sold at a discount, so many poor brothers and sisters wanted to buy it for dinner. However, Corinthian Christians raised a question of conscience: Was it right for Christians to eat meat that had been sacrificed to an idol? Paul did more than answer their question. He laid down a principle to solve any similar problems in the future. This principle is that freedom must be limited by love. Knowledge is precious. However, without love it makes one proud and harmful. On the contrary, love builds up.

Paul compares knowledge and love to emphasize the supremacy of love. One who has knowledge without love is like a computer; he or she may be very powerful in some respects, but lacks humanity. There are so many lonely geniuses. In contrast, the one who loves God is known by God. He or she has a personal relationship with the Creator God, the source of life. Life and love and peace and joy circulate in their souls like a fountain. They can love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength, and love others fervently, as Jesus commanded us. They are the ones who really please God and bless others. One who claims to love God, and yet exercises his freedom and knowledge recklessly, despising others, is not a man of love but of knowledge only. Christians are characterized by love (1 Jn 4:7-8). Those motivated by love can use knowledge and freedom to build up others.

After putting knowledge into perspective, Paul deals with the practical problem that occurred because not everyone had the same knowledge. In verse 4, Paul says, "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world...." Idols are nothing; they made by man's imagination. The Greeks and Romans had imagined many gods. They had 200,000 idols such as Zeus, supreme ruler, and Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty, and even Bacchus, god of wine and vegetation. To us, it would be

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like having a god of Big Mac and a god of Cocoa-cola. There was Hypnos the god of sleep, and Nike the god of victory, or, in our time, the god of shoes. Since these so-called gods were made by man's imagination, they have all the characteristics of fallen man. They fall in love at random, marry, separate, and remarry. They envy each other, fight bloody duels and take revenge. Serving these gods was a part of life to the Corinthians and made them fearful and anxious. When they heard the gospel, they met the one true God. They found true life in God and realized that man-made gods were nothing at all.

Let's read verse 6. "...yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." There is one God who created heaven and earth and all things. In character, he is a Father who protects and provides for his children and loves us with an unconditional love. All things came from God. To glorify him and serve him is the meaning and purpose of our lives. There is but one Lord, Jesus Christ. Through him all things were made (Jn 1:3), and through him salvation came. Jesus died for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life and an eternal love relationship with our Father God. 1 Timothy 2:5 says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." When the Corinthians knew this, they knew that food was made by God for their good. They could receive any kind of food with thanksgiving (1 Ti 4:4-5). So, at mealtime, they said grace and ate joyfully, regardless of the menu.

However, not everyone knew this. Some in Corinth believed in Jesus, but did not know that idols are nothing. They were still trying hard to come out of their idol worshiping culture and habitual lifestyle. Paul calls them weak brothers and sisters (7,11; Ro 14:2). To them, it was very hard to live in Corinth. Their family

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members may have worshiped idols. Their culture was full of idol worship. Their social fellowship, festivals, public holidays and government affairs were all related to idol worship. They saw daily the temple of Apollo, in central view on a hillside. They had to see Aphrodite's temple and the people going to and from it continually. It was a real challenge for them not to fall back into their old habits. They found comfort and strength in Christian fellowship. It was the place to go to enjoy God's love and be free from idol worshiping culture. They were so happy to spend time with fellow Christians. We need Christian fellowship. Young Christians especially cannot maintain Christian life by themselves. We need healthy Christian fellowship in order to grow spiritually. However, when the Corinthian Christians saw fellow Christians who were not concerned about the weak, eating freely whatever they wanted, and even participating in idol feasts, they became confused, and could eventually stumble.

Causing a weaker brother or sister to stumble is a serious problem that no one can ignore. Paul clearly said that to do so was to sin against Christ (12). Jesus warned his disciples sternly about this (Mt 18:6). So those who have strong faith must be prayerful and responsible. They cannot say, "Well I am right with God; if you are harmed by my influence it is your problem." They must exercise their freedom responsibly. Paul himself set the example. Look at verse 13. "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall." When Paul said this, he was ready to eat only vegetables and bread for the rest of his life even if he became malnourished. He showed how strict the strong must be about things that cause weaker Christians to stumble.

Freedom should be limited by love. We can apply this principle in many ways. One is in regard to drinking alcohol. Christians are free to drink alcohol, although

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the Old and New Testaments warn against drunkenness (Pr 20:1; Isa 5:11; Lk 21:34; Gal 5:2). But we must be very careful in using this freedom. If it causes a little one who believes in Jesus to stumble, by emboldening him or her to sin, we must decide not to drink. We must also consider our hobbies as Christians. We are free to enjoy good hobbies. But we must take care that our hobbies are not harmful to others. We can also apply this principle in regard to freedom of speech. In America we are free to say anything to anyone. But we are responsible for the words we speak to others. If our words damage or wound others, we are at fault before God. So the Bible admonishes us to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15).

We are living in a Christian community. In this community there are both strong and weak people in regards to their faith. Those who have strong faith may be those who study the Bible diligently and know many spiritual secrets. They have thick skin and are not easily hurt by others and they can enjoy many things with a clear conscience. Those who have weak faith may be relative newcomers who have not studied the Bible much. These weaker brothers and sisters are very sensitive to certain issues and to the kinds of words that are spoken to them. They are easily hurt by those who talk about them. If we do not restrain our freedom in love, newcomers may not come back again. Only those with strong faith will remain and we will become a very legalistic church that chokes new growth. On the other hand, if we develop an amoral atmosphere that embraces all kinds of ideas, such as gay marriage, and the ordination of homosexual priests, we cannot keep pure gospel faith. We will lose our saltiness and Satan will destroy our fellowship. We were somewhat alarmed last week when the California courts decided to strike down a ban on same-sex marriage. It is like that the homosexual population there will increase remarkably in the days to come. In this kind of national situation, those with strong faith must live up to their convictions and give spiritual

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leadership to the body of Christ. But they must exercise knowledge and faith in love, love that builds up the weaker brothers and sisters. They must humbly serve the weak with the mind of Christ. Jesus embraced weak people with love and patience. So his disciples could be changed into true men of God, a blessing to the world. Jesus told them in John 13:14,15, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." As Jesus showed us, we must embrace one another and cover one another's weakness with the love of Christ.

II. How to use freedom from Paul's example (9:1-27)

In this chapter Paul shares his own example of how he used his freedom to build up others. Paul had not been with Jesus during his earthly ministry, but he received his call to be an apostle directly from the Risen Christ. Paul's apostleship was sealed by the evident work of God among the Corinthian believers (1-2). As an apostle, Paul had rights. Paul had a right to food and drink. Paul had a right to take a believing wife along with him wherever he went, whether on a mission journey, or to a Christian party. Paul also had a right to receive material support (3-6). In verses 7-14, Paul defends the fact that he is worthy to receive support, from a human point of view and from a Scriptural point of view. From a human point of view, Paul took three examples: a soldier, a farmer (Dt 20:6), and a herdsman. Paul gave two examples from a Scriptural point of view: oxen who tread the grain and temple servants (Dt 25:4; Lev 7:28-36). Paul referred to Jesus' own teaching (Lk 10:7). Paul had a right to material support from the Corinthians.

But Paul did not use this right. Why? First, Paul did not use his rights so that he might not hinder the gospel of Christ (12b). Second, Paul did not use any of his

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rights because he was seeking God's reward (15-18). According to verse 16, when Paul preached the gospel he could not boast because he was compelled to preach. Paul voluntarily preached the gospel, yet he had strong stewardship of the gospel work. Paul regarded preaching the gospel as his great reward. He could do so because he was not seeking man's reward, but God's reward. He was already fully rewarded through the gospel. He had received forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the kingdom of God. This is a really great reward. Paul wanted to share this great privilege with other people who did not know the gospel. He would rather not claim his rights in preaching. If we try to receive man's recognition or praise, then we cannot receive a reward from God. We should seek God's reward genuinely, with a pure motive when we preach the gospel. Because we received the gospel free of charge, we must share this gospel free of charge.

Paul was very strict in using his rights for himself, but Paul was very courageous in using his freedom to save others. He boldly crossed many boundaries to share God's love with the lost. Though he was free, he made himself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible. Let's read verse 22. "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." These words express Jesus' spirit of incarnation. They inspire us with new passion to win the lost. We must learn to become all things to all men in order to share the gospel of salvation with them. We should make friends with postmodern young people who resist any kind of authoritarian influence. We should make friends with young homosexuals, even though we may be misunderstood. It is easier to just close our hearts and not take a chance. It is indeed risky to reach out to the weak in ways that truly engage them. Many of us are too cautious. Let's repent and learn Jesus' spirit of incarnation and Paul's passion and boldness to win souls. Paul said in verse 23, "I do all this for the sake

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of the gospel that I may share in its blessings." When Paul humbly served any kind of person, such as Lydia, Timothy and Onesimus, people were moved to accept Christ and to grow in his image. Paul could learn the mind of Christ and God's love for many different people. This was his source of joy. This was a real spiritual blessing to him, worthy of suffering for.

Paul's struggle to use his freedom properly in God was not easy at all. We see how difficult it was in verses 24-27. It was comparable to that of an athlete in strict training to win a gold medal. An athlete must follow a strict diet and exercise a lot. Then he can win a prize that does not last. Our struggle is for a prize that will last forever. We should be more diligent and willing to train ourselves than an Olympic athlete. Paul's aim was clear. It was Jesus Christ. Paul wanted to gain Christ (Php 3:8). Paul did not want to beat the air. If a boxer beats the air, he only wastes his energy. Paul took risks to hit his target. Yet, he was aware of the inherent dangers in doing so. So he always came back to strict self-denial for the sake of his own soul.

Paul had completely changed. In the past, Paul was a merciless person and a murderous person. He tried to destroy the church of God. He imprisoned and killed Christians with zeal. He thought that to act without mercy was to serve God. Yet, now, he was really concerned about weak people. He shed tears over those who suffered from weak faith and taught the strong how to take care of them. Paul was ready to do anything to strengthen a weak brother or sister. Paul was full of love. Paul was humble. Paul humbled himself in order to gain people by any means. How could he be changed into a man of love and humility? What was his secret? Paul tried to imitate Jesus Christ. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." Jesus didn't use his rights even though

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he is the Son of God. Jesus gave up his heavenly glory and privilege. Jesus came into the world to win souls. How did Jesus win souls? To Nicodemus, a typical intellectual and a proud orthodox Jew, Jesus became like a Jew. To a wayward Samaritan woman, though Jesus is the holy Son of God, he became like a close friend. Jesus went to parties with tax collectors and sinners, that is, prostitutes, to win them over to God. Jesus was criticized most severely for doing this. But he was willing to bear all the misunderstanding in order to win one person's soul over to God. Can you eat with a prostitute in order to win her over to God? To the blind, Jesus became eyes. To the crippled, Jesus became legs. Jesus became everything to all men. When Paul tried to imitate this Jesus, he became all things to all men. Paul grew as a great spiritual giant by imitating Christ in love and service to others.

Jesus came down from heavenly glory and endured the weakness of human flesh to embrace us. He served us in every conceivable way and finally died on the cross for us. Let's try to imitate Jesus in his love and service. Let's allow Jesus' love to restrict our rights and freedom, and yet unleash its holy passion to win the lost. Then our church will be healthy and a good influence, and God will make us fruitful in serving campus mission.