

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on July 24, 2016 at Victory of the Lamb on 1 Corinthians 9:1-27

Series: 1 Corinthians – a 21st Century Church

Today's Focus: Giving Up My Rights

“What’s the goal? To win another soul!”

Last week we began unpacking the idea that worshipping God is bigger than just going to church once a week. It’s also *whatever* we do throughout the week to the glory of God and for our neighbor’s good. So every choice that we make, every interaction with someone that we have is transformed into an opportunity to worship God. Will I choose to do what is pleasing to God in this or that situation? Will I decide to speak or act for the good of my neighbor in this or that conversation? Because even though we tend to think of our faith as just this private thing between us and God, it’s not. It’s also a public thing also that impacts other people and that’s why we looked at this important principle last week, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Well today in chapter 9 of 1st Corinthians we’re going to see how Paul lived this out in his life because he believed with all his heart that helping people grow closer to Jesus was the most important thing he could do. He believed that knowing Jesus is the only thing that can make an eternally significant difference in people’s lives. So what was Paul’s goal? To win another soul! As many as possible. With the Gospel of Jesus.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? The answer to all these rhetorical questions is of course... Yes! Remember that some of the Corinthians were looking down on Paul. Some were holding him to unfair standards. Some were questioning his authority as an apostle of Jesus even though the church in Corinth wouldn’t even have existed if it weren’t for Paul making the effort to come and preach to them about Jesus in the first place. So Paul says, ²**Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.**

³**This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me.** ⁴**Don’t we have the right to food and drink?** ⁵**Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas?** ⁶**Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?** So Paul now brings up this topic of his rights. It sounds very American to bring up the topic of one’s rights, doesn’t it? After all we have great freedom in our country to exercise our personal rights. And as Christians even more we have great freedom because of Jesus. Freedom from man-made religious rules. Freedom like Paul said in the last chapter to eat that juicy idol meat burger. And yet our Christian freedom isn’t a freedom to do whatever we want. It’s limited by love for our neighbor like we talked about last week too. It’s a freedom *from* the self-centered nature of sin (What’s best for me?) *for* serving my neighbor in love (What’s best for them?). That’s why Martin Luther once said something that sounds like a paradox but which perfectly sums this up. He said, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject

to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Both these things are true at the same time!

And so Paul is going to go on to explain how he lived this out in his life as an apostle of Jesus, a missionary. But first he lays out some principles: ⁷ **Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk?** ⁸ **Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing?** ⁹ **For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned?** ¹⁰ **Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.** ¹¹ **If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?** ¹² **If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?** In other words, it's the right of every preacher of God's Word to receive financial or physical support from the people who benefit from the work of his ministry. This has been in fact a provision that God has always been concerned about. Those who receive spiritual blessings from their pastors and teachers owe it to them to provide physical or material support for their well-being.

Now I'm sure you would agree, I don't think this means your pastor needs his own airplane to fly around the country! Something is definitely wrong if a pastor demands something like this from his congregation like Creflo Dollar the mega church pastor did. God did not establish the ministry as a path to worldly prosperity or to set up pastors to act like a celebrity. But it is nice to have a mini-van to be able to drive my family around and to have a nice parsonage to call home and an adequate salary to put food on the table and to put some away for the future. And this week I'm particularly thankful to have received a new air conditioner unit at the parsonage so that my family could stay cool! So thank you! I've got absolutely nothing to complain about that's for sure. My family and I are grateful for the incredible generosity here from you as I know Pastor Bill will experience too. We feel the love that comes from your faith in Jesus and that prompts a sustained kind of joy that I get to serve here and to keep sharing the message of Jesus with you all. This is the kind of thing Paul is talking about here.

And what he's saying is that as an apostle of Jesus especially he could've claimed this as his right to be financially support from the Corinthians and more. He could've demanded his rights, especially in light of the fact that the Corinthians owed their faith in Jesus to Paul who risked everything to bring the message of the Gospel to them at great cost to his own well-being. And yet, remember, “What the goal? ... To win another soul!” To win souls for Jesus with the gospel. That was Paul's goal. So what did Paul do? He says,

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

¹³ Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

¹⁵ But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. ¹⁶ For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.

You get what Paul's saying? He's saying, "As a missionary, uniquely called by Jesus no less, I could've demanded my right to receive financial support...but for your sake I didn't do this. I voluntarily gave up this right because I didn't want anyone to reject the Gospel message as if I made it up for my own personal benefit. For your sake I have surrendered my rights out of Christ-like love for you so that your faith in Christ would not be shaken but be strengthened. That's why I worked a 3rd shift job making tents while I was with you. That's why I sometimes seemed worn out and tired while I was teaching you God's Word. Because what was my goal? To win another soul! Your souls. As many as possible. Sharing the gospel.

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

So not only did the apostle Paul surrender his rights, but he also gave up his own personal preferences. "So what are you saying, Paul? That you're like some sort of chameleon, always adapting yourself depending on what group you're hanging out with?" Yes. Wouldn't you? "So what are you saying, Paul? That you'll act one way with some people and then act a completely different way with other people?" Yes, wouldn't you? "So what are you saying, Paul? That you're willing to put up with customs that make you a bit uncomfortable sometimes, that you're willing to accommodate the needs of others even if it means going outside your comfort zone?" Yes, wouldn't you? "So what are you saying, Paul? That you're willing to sacrifice your preferred way of doing things for the sake of someone else?" Yes, wouldn't you? "But why, Paul? What's your goal?" My goal? To win another soul! **I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel...**

Friends, what's the gospel? It's the good news of Christ's victory on behalf of the entire world. It's the good news that death has been knocked out, down for the count by Jesus. That our sins have been

forgiven fully because of Jesus. That the door to heaven has been opened through the completed, redeeming work of Jesus. And what God wants is for all people to believe this good news and be saved. To accomplish that goal that's why God has given us his word and sacraments which come packed with the power of the Holy Spirit to bring people like us to faith in our dear Savior Jesus Christ!

I want to tell you about Glenn, the first person I ever buried as the pastor of Victory of the Lamb. For the first couple years at least I could jokingly tell people, "Come to our church, nobody ever dies here." That was true until Glenn died. He was 79 years old. We started Victory of the Lamb to reach out to people no one else was reaching—especially to reach people who didn't grow up going to church or those many people in our context here in the Milwaukee area who stopped going to church for whatever reason. But I didn't really figure at first that our church would appeal to a guy in his 70s like Glenn. But I remember clear as day the first time he came to our church when we were meeting at Showtime Cinema. As a former cab driver Glenn always wore this old school cab driver's hat and he came in holding a cup of coffee, with a plate of food from the Victory Café, found a comfy seat up front, sat down, put his cup on the cup holder and said out loud, "This is awesome!" He was at church. And he felt comfortable and welcome. It was the first time he'd come to church in a long, long time.

You see as I got to know Glenn and went through Bible 101 class with him, Glenn told me about his church experience growing up. He grew up in a Nazarene church, a very legalistic, strict church that made him think every time he sinned he was backsliding out of God's grace. There were all sorts of man-made rules about how you were supposed to worship and live. So he felt burned out by church because he didn't really ever hear the gospel there. He had many hang-ups about going back to church for years as an adult. But then his family told them about our church. They told him that he'd feel welcome, that our approach was meet people where they're at, that anyone could come and just learn about their Savior.

And so all of a sudden at our church Glenn started hearing the message of Christ's victory—the Gospel, that Jesus did it all as our substitute. And that because Jesus did it all we can be at peace with God. We can have confidence that we are forgiven children of God because this is what his word proclaims, this is the comfort that our baptism provides, this is the strength that the Lord's Supper delivers. And by God's grace, Glenn soaked up this good news like a sponge. He heard the gospel and when the Holy Spirit flipped a switch in his heart, he believed it and cherished it as his most priceless treasure! And he died knowing that salvation was his by grace through faith in Jesus. I remember visiting him in the hospital a week before he died of cancer and Glenn thanked me for our church's approach to reaching out and he confessed that he wasn't afraid to die anymore because we had reached him with the message of his Savior.

I share this story also because right about the same time, online there was a group of people bashing our church. A couple people sarcastically called us "Victory of the movie theater." And some even said that the fact that we met in a movie theater was proof that our Seminary was graduating these arrogant,

liberal leaning pastors who thought we were above tradition, and who were resorting to tricks and gimmicks to reach people because we didn't trust the power of the gospel.

This was super hurtful because anyone who would've actually taken the time to talk with me could've easily learned that nothing could be further from the truth. I was called to start a church from scratch open to contemporary worship and experimentation in ministry forms. Without changing the Gospel I was given freedom to adapt to our context to reach people who needed to hear the message. I picked the movie theater because we were growing and we needed more space and we simply couldn't afford to build our own church much less a cathedral, we couldn't afford to rent a storefront, and at the time it was simply the very best stewardship of resources and our very best opportunity to reach more people. And why would we want to reach more people? So that we could share the gospel of Jesus with them! Because like the Apostle Paul we are convinced that the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. But how will they believe unless they hear it? So my goal? To win another soul. That more may hear. As many as possible the message of the Gospel. That's a goal to not lose sight of. Friends, what's your goal?

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

In two weeks, the Summer Olympics will be beginning. Are you excited? Boy, those Olympic athletes have to stay focused and train hard, don't they? And why? Because they have a goal. A goal to win a gold medal, which by the way, did you know, isn't even fully gold? I read an article that only a small percentage of it is actually gold. Yet athletes compete so hard to get that medal. Many sacrifice other ambitions, other pursuits, sometimes even other relationships and put off having a family for this goal of winning of gold medal.

But of course as Christians we have another goal. A goal truly worth focusing on. To help people win the prize. Not a shiny gold medal like in the Olympics, not a temporary crown of garland like at the Isthmian games held in ancient Corinth, but the crown of eternal life in heaven!

So let's not let anything or anyone jeopardize our race—either as individuals: friends, don't let anything distract you from Jesus and staying close to him. Nor as a church—that nothing would distract us from staying focused on our mission. We want to share Christ's victory with today's people, loving them enough to meet them where they are. Why? What's the goal? To win another soul! As many as possible. With the Gospel. Amen.