

I Corinthians 9:16-23 All Things to All People

In our text today we find one of the more interesting lines in all of Paul's letters. "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." What does this mean?

A Living Wage

It is always good to remember the context. In chapter 8 the topic is how to handle food that has been sacrificed by idols. Some want to exercise their freedom, which leads into Paul's discussion of his freedom as an apostle.

The main idea is that he has the right to make a living from preaching and teaching the gospel, and serving as an apostle. The problem does not derive itself from the unwillingness of the church in Corinth to help out financially. It is the other way around. The church wants to pay him, but *he* is refusing to *let them*.

He refused to claim his rights as an apostle, to exercise his freedom. He wants to proclaim the gospel. at least to them, "free of charge."

Paul's Issue

Unlike the other apostles, whoever they were, who worked among the faithful in the various cities, he

worked at what we would call a secular job. He was bi-vocational.

He was a tentmaker. This employment allowed him to pay his own way. Whatever the case, he wouldn't take payment from the people in Corinth and felt obliged to explain why.

Without explaining how he did it, Paul claimed that for the one living by the law, he became as one under law. For the one not under the law he became as one not under law. And then he says that to the weak he became weak, all so that he might win those under law, those not under law, and the weak.

He explained it as we have already stated, "I became all things to all people, in order that by all means, I might save some."

Relative Stories

I am reminded of a family story from my mom's side of the family and it has to do with money. From time-to-time in the back and forth of things among aunts and uncles and cousins, there would be some expenses incurred. Someone would want to help pay and another would refuse to take the money. The confrontations could be entertaining if everyone was in good humor but sometimes tempers flared and it was best to stay out of the room.

Myself, I have been caught up in this dynamic a few times. I have officiated three funerals, one uncle and two aunts, and each time I have played the game by saying, “I won’t take money for this, it is a gift for the family,” only to be met with, “Oh yes you will.”

One time they sent the largest cousin to intimidate me into taking the money. Another time they sent cash through the mail from an obscure post office, and with no return address, and unsigned, just, “the family,” so I wouldn’t be able to send it back.

In our case, the primary character trait at work is stubborn pride.

Considerations

The main characteristic at work in Paul is Love. Paul wants to set an example for the people in the church at Corinth, and that example explains why he didn’t want their money.

There are three texts that help us to understand. The first is from Chapter 8, the second is from Philipians, and the the third is from 1Corinthians 13.

“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to

idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

We are also aided by some lines from Philipians,

“Count others better than yourselves,” Paul wrote in Chapter 2, and, “Look not only to your own needs, but also to the needs of others.” And we might also listen once again to 1 Corinthians 13 , where Paul gives a poetic definition of divine love,

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Paul is setting an example for the church about the exercise of Christian freedom. He is recognizing that his purpose in living is wrapped up in relationships with an array of people from all kinds of places and backgrounds and levels of spiritual maturity; that those people are the most valuable gifts he has been given.

He is determined to practice what used to be called “disinterested” love, meaning the kind of love that places the concern for the other ahead of the concern for the self.

With this love in mind, Paul voluntarily defers. He deliberately sets aside his freedom not only for the sake of the weak, but as an example for the church, which means for us. I am sure that each of us will give attention to this example and how it might be followed in our lives.

Comfort

If you are like me the news that has met us today has left you stunned. That is okay, being “all things to all people” today for us means to be a source of comfort and strength, for each other and for the Nace family as we have opportunity.

Let us grieve and be stunned, but not with despair, rather with hope, because as Paul has taught us in Corinthians, which we have heard from today, that “death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

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