

By All Possible Means 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

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1 Cor 9:22 calls us to a special attitude of heart. It is a very personal statement: 'I have become all things.. so that I might save some'. What does that mean?

I. True Freedom: the sacrifice of self

Paul's attitude to evangelism in v22 does not come out of the blue. How he does evangelism is rooted in how he thinks as a Christian. That is true of all of us: how you approach evangelism will reflect how you think as a Christian and whether you think as a Christian at all. v19 'Though I am free.. I make myself a slave'. He is free, yet chooses to be a slave. This is the central paradox of Christianity. Who is the freest man who ever lived? Jesus Christ. What did he do? He sacrificed himself on the cross. Freedom is a big issue in this section of 1 Cor: see 8:19, 9:1, also 8:9. Paul had this mindset that he learned from Jesus. Chapters 8 & 9 give us three examples.

The first is to do with food, especially *meat offered to idols*. In 8:4 onwards he argues an idol is nothing: there is only one true God. Paul is therefore free to eat the food even though offered to idols by others. Yet he lays down this freedom: he explains in v7-13. On account of others who would be offended by him he will not use his freedom.

Second example is to do with *getting married*: read 9:5 He has the right to be: he has chosen not to exercise that right.

But most of chapter 9 is about the third example, to do with the right of having *financial support as a Christian worker* from the churches. From 9:6 he argues that natural justice v7 and the principle of OT law, v8 onwards, teach the same thing: Paul has the right to be supported, see v12. But, v12 'we do not use this right', v15 'I have not used any of these rights'. This is the mindset which Paul has. Our society is much given over to pursuit of self interest, pleasure & self advancement. We are slaves of our own pleasures, desires & sinful natures. But here is a radical alternative: Paul is a most free man: he is free to lay down his rights. Free to choose to sacrifice. Brings that attitude to his evangelism. This is why he speaks of becoming 'all things to all men', because he is not in the grip of self interest. In 1 Cor 1 Paul describes the gospel as 'the message of the Cross' 1:18. But it is not just a matter of what he communicates, it is also expressed & demonstrated in how he lived. If we do not have a self sacrificial spirit within us, as we go out to represent Christ, our behaviour will deny our gospel. It is this slavery to self that God wants to set us free from so that we may follow & represent Jesus. Methods of evangelism are meaningless if our hearts are in the wrong place. We need the mindset of truly free people: free to choose to sacrifice.

II. Great Priority: the gospel

What is it that mattered so much to Paul that he was willing to set aside his rights? Listen to his own answer 9:12 'We do not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ'. The interests of the gospel was the central motivation for Paul's life and conduct: v22-23 'I have become all things to all men so that by all means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel'. His priority is not making money, being successful, having a nice house, getting married, getting the best degree, getting the best job or millions of other legitimate objectives in themselves. His burning longing is to see the good news of Jesus advance in peoples' lives: 'I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible' v19. The challenge to us is what is it that we live for? We can come to church each Sunday but essentially our priority remains ourselves. In which case what will our evangelism be like? Half hearted, spasmodic and probably of little effect. And why does this gospel matter so much? Look at the verse: so that 'by all possible means I might save some'. We need to dwell on what is at stake. That I might **save some**. Have you consider the destiny of those all around us who live without God, who ignore Jesus? Our neighbours, our work colleagues, members of our families. What will their end be? What will they do when Christ returns to raise the dead & call all of us before his judgement throne? What refuge will they have from the all seeing eyes of God Almighty & from his holy wrath on that Day? See Rev 6:15-17. What is it that can rescue people from that end? The gospel of Jesus Christ. 'The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God'. 1 Cor 1:18. If our hearts are touched with the priority of this gospel, then we will sacrifice our self interest, we will lay ourselves down, we will do anything it takes, that others might be saved.

III. God's Agent: me

Two things to dwell on as we focus on v22: firstly here is human agency & secondly here is deliberate choice.

1) Human agency: 'That... I might save some'. It could sound as though Paul thinks he or we can save people ourselves. But Paul believes emphatically that salvation is God's work, not ours. Already made that very plain in 1 Cor 1:23-30. See the repeated words, 'God chose' Also v30 'It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus'. Paul is not contradicting himself in chapter 9. His point is that **God uses agents to work** his salvation. Only the blood of Christ saves people, but God uses us to tell people about Jesus so that they can put their trust in him. We see this in Acts (e.g. Acts 4:31, 8:4). So Paul, who is one of the most passionate believers that God is utterly sovereign in the work of salvation, is also deeply eager to be reaching out with the message of the gospel to others, in which sense he can speak in terms of saving others. 'So that I might save some' needs to be written on every believing heart.

2) Deliberate choice. What does it mean 'I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some'? Paul in v19-23 speaks of his choice to act as one of God's agents.

Negatively: what he does not mean.

Not mean he compromises in godly behaviour: he does not become drunk in order to reach drunks. You can see he alludes to that in v21 'I am under Christ's law', even as he reaches out to win people.

Not mean he compromises the message: some have felt that aspects of NT teaching needed to be adjusted and abandoned to make the gospel attractive to people today. They have tried to drop idea of hell, of wrath, of Christ being the only way to God. But Paul will not touch that way of thinking. See 1 Cor 1:22 'Jews demand miraculous signs & Greeks look for wisdom

but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles but to those whom God called, both Jews & Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God'.

Not mean the compromise of self protection: some people go so softly, softly on the grounds of avoiding giving offence, that they keep silent about the gospel altogether. This is not because they care so deeply about others, but because they are trying to protect themselves from possible embarrassment or criticism or falling out with others. Nothing could be further from Paul's attitude. None of these approaches are what Paul meant. What did he mean?

Positively: doing everything he legitimately can to cross the barriers to reach others, whatever the cost to himself: just as Christ sacrificed the glories of heaven, to take human flesh and to die on a cross to reach us. Paul is asking all the time '**how can I bridge the gap? How will this choice of mine affect the progress of the gospel?**' To reach the Jews, those under the law v20 'I became like a Jew'. For example, in Acts 21 Paul went through purification rites with a group of others and paid their expenses to indicate his identification with his fellow Jews. But among Gentiles, v21, 'those not under the law I became like one not having the law': he ate their non-kosher food, he had meals with Gentiles and went into their homes. In Acts 17 he spoke to the Athenians showing he had read their poets & philosophers & examined their city. Among those with over scrupulous attitudes, 'the weak' v22 he accommodated his behaviour in order to avoid giving them offence, so that he could win them & keep them. Some saw this as being inconsistent. Paul saw it is sacrificing own freedoms to cross the barriers into the world of others, so that the gospel would advance. We have to take this principle out of its first century wrappings and ask the same questions Paul asked, but **today:** 'how can I bridge the gap? How will this choice of mine affect the progress of the gospel?' Have you ever asked that? How can I behave here, even if it puts me out, so that I can have opportunity to befriend people & represent Christ? The greatest danger is we don't ask the questions: 'how can I bridge the gap? How will this choice of mine affect the progress of the gospel?'

The challenge here is not just to do evangelism: it is think & act like Christ & his apostles: to demonstrate the true freedom to choose the way of sacrifice: to seek the great priority of the advance of the gospel: and to be willing & eager to act as God's agents ourselves & not to leave it to someone else. May God help us to take his word to heart.