For the Sake of the Gospel
Scripture text: 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Introduction

In the letter of First Corinthians and the Apostle Paul wrote about the church – what it is and what it should be doing. I have stated before that the church is a group of people called out of the world by God into fellowship with Jesus Christ in order to be God’s holy people. Paul wrote that the church is a group of people with a calling, with a purpose. We, the people, are the church. We are called God’s building, God’s field, and God’s temple. As the church, God’s Word tells us that we are to act like the church. There should be something remarkably different between the church and the world – between believers in Jesus Christ and the unbelievers in the world.

The passage today reveals some things about the mission of the church – what we, as God’s people, are all called to do. We have heard what the church is, but what is the mission of the church? It is to make disciples of all nations. We are commissioned, with a Great Commission, by our Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples who are to make more disciples. The first condition to making disciples, though, is to make believers in Jesus Christ. I am not saying that we, the church, make believers, for God is the One who calls and draws people to Himself through faith in His Son Jesus Christ. But Paul said in Romans chapter ten:

Romans 10:14 ...How are [people] to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

We have to preach the gospel – Jesus died, was buried and rose from the grave for the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation of man to God. We have to preach the gospel in order for people to hear it, to believe it, and to be reconciled to God. We then come alongside new believers and teach them the ways of Christ, disciple them, so that they become disciples and so they go and preach the gospel and make other disciples. That is the mission of the church, and all of this is for the glory of God. We bring glory to Him when we fulfill this mission, when we preach the gospel and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

But, how important is the gospel to the life of the church? We know we ought to do it, but is it more a guideline, something we should do, or is it something necessary? Can a church be faithful to God when it is not actively engaged in preaching and teaching the gospel to those who haven’t heard it or believe it? No, I don’t think so. Just as discipleship is a vital part of the church, meaning it is not some occasional thing we do, evangelism is likewise a vital part of the church. In fact, as I mentioned, we have to preach the gospel first if we are to make disciples. And the gospel is more than just snatching people out of the grip of hell and redeeming God’s fallen creation. It is more than just receiving eternal life and spending it with God and our
family and friends. The gospel is truly good news that changes lives, right here right now. A Christian is truly a new creation from the moment he or she believes.

Sometimes, though, we can do things that hinder the gospel. We can do things that make preaching and teaching the gospel less effective. That is Paul’s point in this passage. We have to be mindful of what we do and what we say and how we are perceived if our ministry is to be effective. Now, I want to clarify something. I am not saying that a person’s faith in Christ is dependent upon what we do or say, for God is still the One who saves. I am not saying we have to be perfect, sinless people for the message of the gospel to be received. If that were the case, then no one would believe our message. What I am saying is that how we conduct ourselves can have an impact on the mission of the church, and how effective we are in fulfilling that mission. We have to keep the gospel and the mission of the church in focus.

The Christian’s Freedom

The first statement Paul made in this passage was about his freedom. He said, “I am free from all.” Part of this statement may have to do with Paul being a citizen of the Roman Empire. He was a free man under the law of the Roman government. Another freedom Paul had was his freedom in Jesus Christ. When a person accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he or she is free indeed. Jesus frees us from the deadly consequence of sin and frees us from the burden of trying to measure up to a standard that no one except Jesus could meet. In chapter eight Paul admonishes the Corinthian church to be careful with the freedom they have in Christ. In talking about food sacrificed to idols, Paul told the Corinthian believers they were free to eat whatever was given to them, whether the food had been offered to an idol or not. However, they should be careful with this freedom, that their right to eat whatever they want should not be a stumbling block to others. Maybe someone else would be offended by the eating of food offered to idols. Maybe someone else sitting at that table would question the faith of someone, or lose faith in Jesus Christ, by exercising that freedom. Therefore, for the sake of the other person, Paul stated this freedom should not be exercised.

Paul then wrote in chapter nine about another aspect of his freedom – his right as a minister to be financially supported by the church. Some believe Paul was defending his ministry because some in the church were offended that he would not accept their money in support of his ministry. Others take a different view and believe Paul was defending his ministry because some in the church believed he should not receive the church’s money. I think the last one is the case. I believe Paul was telling the church that he had the right to be financially supported for the ministry of preaching the gospel, that he had the right to make a living from the ministry he was called to do. However, he had not taken advantage of that right. Though he had the right to receive financial support for his ministry, he had not exercised that right.

Though we are free in Christ and have the right to many things, it is worthwhile to put away anything if it will hinder the progress of spreading the gospel. Old
Testament law and tradition would have supported Paul’s right to earn his living by his ministry to the church. Paul chose not to claim that right if it helped others and furthered the gospel ministry. For the sake of the gospel and in order to not hinder the progress of preaching the gospel and making disciples, Paul did not make an issue of this. There are two things in this chapter related to Paul’s commitment in preaching the gospel and making disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Being All Things to All People**

Notice, though Paul was free from all people and free in Christ, he had made himself a servant (or slave) to everyone. In the passage from chapter nine, Paul literally said he had “enslaved” himself. He voluntarily made himself a slave, a servant, to all people so that people would believe in Jesus Christ. The attitude Paul had is that whatever freedom or comfort or rights he should have, he would give all that up, in order to win more people to Jesus Christ. Paul didn’t want anything to disqualify him, or to tarnish his preaching of the gospel, or to make him less effective for the kingdom of God. Paul would sacrifice whatever he thought he deserved in order that more people would hear and believe the good news of Jesus Christ.

Shouldn’t that be our attitude? Shouldn’t we think that way? In chapter six, Paul told us to think with an eternal perspective, meaning, don’t let the temporary desires and issues in life get us off focus from eternal matters. As the people of God we should always be thinking with a Christ-ward direction. How can we witness more effectively? How can we be more useful to the kingdom of God? Is what I am doing helping or hindering my witness of Jesus Christ? Is there something in my life that I can give up for the sake of the gospel? If there is something in your life that hinders your effectiveness as a disciple of Jesus preaching the good news, then get rid of it!

Paul wrote in verse 22 that he had “become all things to all people.” The reason Paul became all things to all people was that he wanted all people to hear and believe the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul described several ways he had conformed to those he proclaimed the gospel in order to “win” those people to Christ:

- He became a servant...to win more.
- He became a Jew...to win Jews.
- He became like those under the law...to win those under the law.
- He became like those outside the law of God (Gentiles)...to win Gentiles.
- He became weak...to win those who are weak.

When Paul was with the Jews, he conformed to the Jewish standards even though he knew such matters were not essential. When Paul was with the Gentiles, he was willing to live like them, as long as he didn’t disobey God. To those weak, he was willing to not seem superior to them, but to be like them. Paul conformed to those he was trying to win. Does this sound like a politician? The elections are just a few weeks away and every politician is trying to get your vote. And many of them will
tell you whatever they think you want to hear in order to win your vote. I don't think that is the sense of what Paul is saying here. I think Paul did his best to adapt to the people he served so that he might win more of them to faith in Jesus Christ.

Another word we could use for win is “recruit”. Think of God’s church as an army fighting the dark spiritual forces of this world. We are at war with the enemy, Satan, and our Commander-in-Chief, Jesus, wants us to get out there and recruit soldiers for His army so that we can battle the enemy. That is the sense of winning people to Christ. Not only do we want to preach the good news so that more people can believe and be saved from sin and separation from God, but we want to recruit them to be a part of God's army in order to fight the enemy. Paul became all things to all people in order to acquire disciples through the preaching of the gospel. Paul became all things to all people in order that he might see more people come to faith in Jesus Christ. He did everything for the sake of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Training Ourselves for the Prize

Another aspect of Paul keeping the gospel centered in his life, doing things for the sake of the gospel, is sports. I am not kidding. Paul said you ought to do sports for the sake of the gospel...well, not exactly. Personally, I am not what you would call a sports fan. My dad spent just about every day watching sports. He loved it. High school, College, Professional. Football, Baseball, Basketball. If there was a game playing, my dad was usually watching it or listening to it. I didn't get that gene from him. I was not the athletic one in our family. Just ask Gena or any of my family and friends. I don't know why there is a seventh-inning stretch in football or where the scrimmage line is on a baseball field. I also don't know what it is like to train your body for sports, which is no doubt apparent. I do understand, though, that for many people, if they want to play well in sports, if they want to win the game, they have to work for it. They have to train their bodies. So do Christians.

Jesus didn’t save us from our sin just to be bench warmers and to wait for His return. We ought to be flexing our spiritual muscles now. We ought to be running the race in order to win as many people to Christ as possible. We ought to fight the enemy with all the endurance and spiritual strength we have, through prayer and meditation on God's Word. We have to be determined, single minded, persevering, like an athlete training for a big game or competition. We have to be willing to set aside personal wants, desires and agendas for the sake of the gospel. If there is something we desire, we should evaluate it through the lens of the gospel and determine if it helps or hinders. We ought to run the race well – Run to win:

*Hebrews 12:1–2* ...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.
We are in a spiritual race and we need to run to win. Paul also said we should fight the good fight like a boxer. Paul mentioned that he trained his body to run well and to fight well. He told Timothy something similar:

1 Timothy 6:11–12 But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. **Fight the good fight of the faith.** Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Being a servant of God and a disciple of Christ requires commitment. It requires faith. It requires perseverance. It requires discipline. The enemy, Satan, is going to try to get you off track. He is going to try to tempt you with all sorts of things to get you off focus of the gospel and the mission of the church. Paul wrote that he “disciplined” his body and “enslaved it”. He was not going to be controlled by fleshly desires and instead was going to control his body for the sake of the gospel. He did this for the sake of his witness and testimony so that he may win more people to Christ. The race before him, the fight before him, and all that he did was for the sake of the gospel.

Paul disciplined his body so that he would not be disqualified. Some interpret this phrase in verse 27 as the possibility of one losing his/her salvation. I don’t think Paul is saying that. I would have concerns about someone who claims to be a believer and shows little evidence of the Holy Spirit working in his/her life. God is the judge, but I believe there ought to be fruit of the Spirit if one has repented of sin and accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That said, I believe what Paul means by being disqualified is that he will lose his witness, his testimony of Jesus Christ. He does not want there to be any reason to bring an accusation against him and tarnish the good news of Jesus Christ, or to make his ministry and the preaching of the gospel ineffective. He did all things and disciplined himself for the sake of the gospel, so more people would come to Jesus Christ.

**Conclusion**

In closing, the church was called to be the people of God to bring glory to Him and to make disciples of all nations. We are disciples of Jesus Christ who are making more disciples of Jesus Christ. We have to preach the good news, the gospel, the wondrous Gift from God that has been made available for all people. Let us go out this week and recruit people for God’s army. Let us go out this week and find at least one person who does not have a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and win that person to God. Let us be faithful in proclaiming the good news to our family, our friends and our community so that they may be a part of God’s family. And if there is anything in our lives that may hinder our witness and the mission of the church, may we remove it for the sake of the gospel. May it be so. Amen!