

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

In a seminary missions class, Herbert Jackson told how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that would not start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years.

Ill health forced the Jackson family to leave, and a new missionary came to that station. When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, "Why, Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life. For two years, needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting that power to work.

J.B. Phillips paraphrases Ephesians 1:19-20: "How tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God." When we make firm our connection with God, his life and power flow through us.

Our text today from 1 Corinthians addresses spiritual power—where it comes from, how it should be used, and who needs it. If our personal power is fed from an evil source, power can be misused. Paul uses his own experience to help us understand this issue.

Paul admits that the mission he is on was not one of his choosing. We find in Acts 9 the conversion story of Paul, who was then still known as Saul. At that time in his life, he was hunting down and persecuting Christians. But Jesus stopped Paul dead in his tracks one day as he traveled to Damascus. He was temporarily blinded.

Eventually his sight was restored and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He no longer hunted down Christians to make their lives miserable. Now Paul's mission was to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul did not choose his new mission—God chose it—God called Paul to it.

He did not need to find his way on his own. No longer was Paul's power being fed by hatred, anger, jealousy, and frustration; instead, God empowered him with the Holy Spirit to help

him fulfill his mission. Likewise, our spiritual guide for doing our part for the building of God's kingdom needs to come from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Paul teaches us that one way to tell if we are being led by the Holy Spirit is whether or not we expect something in return for our efforts.

After a preacher died and went to heaven, he noticed that a New York cab driver had been given a higher place than he had. "I don't understand," he complained to St. Peter. "I devoted my entire life to my congregation."

"Our policy is to reward results," explained St. Peter. "Now what happened, Reverend, whenever you gave a sermon?"

The minister admitted that some in the congregation fell asleep.

"Exactly," said St. Peter. "And when people rode in this man's taxi, they not only stayed awake, they prayed." (Ray Heit, *Reader's Digest*)

Our humanness can lead us on a selfish mission where we might say and do all of the right things, outwardly claiming we are serving God, but inwardly we are looking for accolades or some other reward. Paul tells us that our reward is the privilege we are given from God to spread his gospel through what we say and do.

In the second half of today's scripture, beginning with verse nine, we might get the impression that Paul compromised his beliefs in order to get people to listen to him. In *The Message* translation of the bible using contemporary language, these verses are interpreted as saying:

"Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!"

Paul's message here is a very challenging one for us. He tells us God's mission is not going to be accomplished if we merely hang out with people just like us. We are instructed by the Holy Spirit through Paul's letter, to take the time to get to know people who are not like us, people whom we might otherwise avoid because they make us feel uncomfortable. Perhaps, they don't have the same values or morals we have; maybe we inwardly harbor a prejudice towards a particular type of person, or maybe they hurt us at one time.

Paul tells us to get to know these people. Hear them out. Discover what their lives are like. Try to understand them. Unfortunately, our natural tendency might be to subtly or outrightly condemn certain people. When we do this, we likely will miss any opportunity we may have had to share Christ with them in any fashion at all. The lifestyle, beliefs, or color of a person should never stop us from sharing Christ with them. We should be reaching out to people and establishing relationships to help build God's kingdom.

I read something titled the "Ten Commandments of Human Relations," which encourages ideas for building relationships with those we might not normally approach.

1. Speak to people. There is nothing as nice as a cheerful word of greeting.
2. Smile at people. It takes seventy-two muscles to frown, only fourteen to smile.
3. Call people by name. Music to anyone's ears is the sound of his/her own name.
4. Be friendly and helpful.

5. Be cordial. Speak and act as if everything you do is genuinely a pleasure, and if it isn't, learn to make it so.
6. Be genuinely interested in people. You can like almost everybody if you try.
7. Be generous with praise, cautious with criticism.
8. Be considerate with the feelings of others. There are usually three sides to a controversy: yours, the other fellow's, and the right one.
9. Be alert to serve. What counts most in life is what we do for others.
10. Add to this a good sense of humor, a big dose of patience, and a dash of humility, and you will be rewarded manifold through life.

Once we overcome the hurdle of avoiding or judging people unlike us, all of these tips enhance our chance to help others find Jesus. You also may very well lead people to the spiritual empowerment of God, giving power to the powerless. This is our assignment, our mission from God, until we take our last breath in this world. Amen.