

All Things To All People

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Sermon delivered by Reverend Leo Douma, 4th March, 2001

"This morning we will vote on two new deacons. The thought may come up: "Why do we need more deacons, with possibly two more at the end of the year? Do we really have that much need in our congregation?" No, we don't. But the questions betray a certain orientation. That is, an inwards one, the caring for our own. But our calling is much broader; it needs to be far more outwards. Jesus said the task of the church is to "make disciples of all nations". The church Vision Statement says under the heading "*Need orientated evangelism*": "*We recognise that in our multicultural Australia, the 'nations' are now our neighbours. We confess that evangelism has not been our strength. So we commit ourselves to developing and training those spiritually gifted... we commit ourselves to discerning the deep needs and struggles in our communities, thinking creatively of ways to address those needs and thus address the spiritual vacuum behind those needs, namely the reconciliation and hope that only Jesus can give.*"

To be able to do this well we need the mindset and the passion we find in the apostle Paul. We read in v19 of our text that he says "*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone...*" Now why does he say that? Why has he made himself a slave to all? Why is he becoming "as a Jew" to the Jews? Why did he make himself "like one not having the law"? And why become weak for the weak? What was his aim? Well, five times he says that his aim is to win people. Verse 19: "*...that I might win the more.*" Verse 20: "*...that I might win the Jews . . . that I might win those under the law.*" Verse 21: "*That I might win those who are without law.*" Verse 22: "*That I might win the weak.*" So five times he says that his aim in adapting to the way people live and to their needs is to win them. Then at the end of verse 22, as he sums up the point of what he is doing, he says, "*I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.*" So here he gives another clue. Five times it was

"to win" people and now it is "to save" people. Then in verse 23 he gives one last aim: *"And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it."* Paul here is saying that he must do this; otherwise there is a serious question as to whether he is also saved. If you do not go out of your way to win and save others, it questions whether you really know for yourself what it is to be saved. So Paul tells us his aim in three ways: 1) to win others; 2) to save others; 3) to be participant in the benefits of the gospel himself. Now what does this mean? Win others for what? Save others from what? The most straightforward answer is given in Romans 5:9: *"Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him."* When we put our trust in Christ, we are saved from the wrath of God. So now we know our goal and aim. Our aim, like Paul's, is to save people from the wrath of God and to win them over for eternal life. And in loving people like this we prove the reality of our own faith and confirm our participation in the gospel.

Now a bugging question presses itself on me here: Is one of the reasons that we make as little effort as we do in winning others the fact that we don't believe the wrath of God is coming? Do we still believe in hell? You will say "Yes" because it's a church doctrine. But what about as a reality that deeply impacts on our passion for winning and saving others? When you see many of the folk around you, many who don't believe, does your heart go out for them, or doesn't their destiny impact on you? When we speak of a "Needs Orientated Evangelism" in our Vision Statement, and think of the deep needs in the community, when we think creatively of a diaconate that is helping the poor, caring for the abused and lonely, counselling the broken hearted, it's not just an exercise in psychology or social work. As Christians we know why we live in a broken world. We know of our rebellion against God. We know that one day all mankind will have to answer to God. In reaching to the needs in the community the aim is to get to the ultimate need behind all the felt needs. The aim is to win them over to trust Christ so that they may be saved from eternal damnation. If you don't think much or feel much about what will happen to unbelievers, then it will be hard for you to feel the sense of sorrow and urgency that Paul felt. What we need to do is

seriously think about the wrath of God that is coming. Until this figures up large in our view of life we will not have the passion for evangelism that Paul had.

Now what was Paul's strategy for winning and saving others? Well, he outlined it in v19. His strategy was to use his Christian freedom to become every bodies' slave. In 1520 Martin Luther wrote a pamphlet called "The Freedom of the Christian." He began it with this paradox: "*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all*". He was following Paul in our text. Luther went on to explain that Paul's strategy is love. In Galatians 5:13 Paul says: "...*you were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*" Love, by its very nature, is ready to serve and be subject to the one who is loved. Now, that's what Paul says he is doing in our text, in v19, "*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible.*" The way Paul expressed love, like Jesus did, was to serve others, to live for others' sake.

You can see this clearly in the three things Paul says about his relation to the law in these verses. Firstly v20- "*To those under the law I became like one under the law, (though I myself am not under the law)...*" So he says he is NOT under law. Secondly, v21- "*To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law...)*" So he says, in the second place, that he is not without the law of God. Thirdly, v21b: "*But I am under the law of Christ.*" So there are three statements about his relation to the law: 1) I am not under law; 2) I am not without the law of God; 3) I am under the law of Christ. You might say, "That sure sounds involved." But life is involved. This is the sort of careful thinking you must do if you are going to take the risks involved in adapting to all kinds of people so that you might save some. As soon as you say, "*I make myself slave to everyone*" (:19), and "*I have become all things to all men*" (:22), you are walking the razor's edge between fruitless separatism and unprincipled expediency. If you fall one way you are of no use because you have no connection with the world; if you fall the other way you are of no use because you are just like the world. So how do you keep your faith and your freedom

and your passion to win people and not just copy people? The answer is that you think hard about your relation to the law of God - the way Paul did.

And what you come to is this: Firstly, as a Christian, I am not "*under the law*" (:20). That is, I am not bound to earn my salvation by the law, nor am I bound to live by the ceremonial, dietary laws of the Old Testament (for example, circumcision, holy days, no ham and pork, no mixed fibres, no meat offered to idols, and so on). I am free to go to the home of an animist and humanist and eat whatever they put before me in order to win them for Christ (1 Corinthians 10:27). Secondly as a Christian I am, however, not without God's law (:21). In 1 Corinthians 7:19 Paul says, "*Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.*" This is a remarkable verse! It says that circumcision, which was a commandment of God in the Old Testament is negligible for Christians, but the commandments of God are not negligible. This is why we distinguish between the ceremonial law and the moral law. As Christians we submit, always, to the moral law of God. Thirdly, we are under the law of Christ. This is the law of love. In Galatians 6:2 Paul says, "*Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfil the law of Christ.*"

So here is how all of this looks for us as a church. If we want to generate the right environment for the "seed of the kingdom" to grow, then we not only look inwards with a deep love for each other (as we saw last Sunday) and have small groups where we can minister to each other (as we saw the week before), but we must also have a strong outward orientation. Everything we do, from personal lifestyle to worship must have an eye on winning unbelievers to Christ. We need to ask ourselves what things are cultural, what things can we easily change because it doesn't matter one way or another. And what things are principal, clearly part of God's moral law, Christ's law that we must never compromise on. This needs very careful thought, because the church has too often regarded its tradition and church culture as God's law and been unwilling to make any change, with the result that it has often become a spiritual ghetto – completely out of touch with the world that it is supposed to disciple. And of course the church has at times also tried so hard to be relevant that it completely

compromised itself and lost the point of the gospel. Where are we in this? Do we have a strong orientation to seeking the lost in everything we do as a church?

And what about us as individuals? Are we willing to have a look at our characters, our cultural backgrounds, our middle class status, our sense of dress, our use of language, our work, our use of time, and consider how we might do things differently so that we can reach others to win them for Christ? Are we so different from others that we can't even get to first base with unbelievers to talk of the gospel? Or are we perhaps so much like others, so worldly, that they can't tell any difference? Perhaps you say, "This is all getting a bit much. Why can't I just be who I am? In Christ I am free – just take me as I am!" That is true of course. But have we no passion for those facing the coming wrath of God? Paul was one of the most well off men of his time. Highly educated, a Roman citizen, financially independent. Yet he put it all aside so that he would remove any stumbling blocks for presenting the gospel. He made himself willingly a slave to the weaknesses of others for the sake of winning them over for Christ. What Paul was doing was to identify himself with the persons he wanted to witness to. He understood their cultural and character make-up, their needs and hang-ups, and by identifying with those things he was able to aim his witness to where they were at. By identifying with those people he was able to remove the barriers and stumbling blocks and clearly speak to their needs in their situation. He did everything he possibly could to make sure that the only stumbling block was Jesus Himself.

Talking of Jesus, in this model of identifying with the needs of others, we see the approach Jesus Himself took. When Jesus came to save His people He didn't do it from a distance. As Paul writes in Philippians 2 "*He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*" Or as Answer 35 of the Catechism so beautifully summarises it "The eternal Son of God... took to himself a truly human nature... in all things just like us ... except for sin." Jesus identified himself with us, our frailties as humans, our joys and anxieties, our laughter and our crying, our deepest needs, so that He might save many through His death and resurrection. And

He said, *"As the Father sent me, so I send you"*. And Paul wrote, *"...I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of the many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."* (1 Corinthians 10:33-11:1) There is our example and calling."

Guidelines for discussion in bible study groups

1. What, do you think, is the predominant orientation of our church, our worship and our various activities? Is it inwards or outwards? Why? Do we need to consider refocusing some things (all things) to be more outreach orientated?
2. What does Paul mean by "winning" people and "saving" people? Save from what and win for what? What does he mean when he says he does these things in order "that I may become a fellow partaker of the gospel"? How might this apply to us?
3. How much does the doctrine of hell, the understanding of the wrath of God, impact on our lives? Do we feel passionately about family members, friends, neighbours, workmates, who are unbelievers facing hell? If not, why? If we do, what shall we do about it?
4. What was Paul's strategy for winning and saving others? Explain in relation to Martin Luther's pamphlet on Christian freedom. Why is Paul's strategy like "walking on the razor's edge"? Are you managing the balance in being "all things to all men"? Or would you suggest you are falling one way or the other? Which? Why? What can/ should you do about it?
5. Explain what Paul means when he says, "I am not under law... I am not free from God's law... I am under the law of Christ..." Does he confuse you? Or can you explain how these references to the law helps keep Paul in balance when being all things to all men?

6. What are the cultural things in our worship and church life? Are there things we should change so we can relate better to our communities and reach out to unbelievers? What are the principles that we should never compromise on? Are we in fact tending to compromise in some of these things? What are some things in your own life (character, cultural background, work, language, status etc) that might be a hindrance to winning others for Christ? Are you willing (like Jesus and Paul) to be a servant, a slave to others in all things in order that we may win them for Christ?