

1 Corinthians 9:19

PREFACE

Two weeks ago we looked at vv16-18 of Chapter Nine, in which the apostle Paul passionately described his compulsion, his calling to preach the gospel without charge. Now, in the next paragraph and to the end of this chapter, he describes how he goes about this. In the first part of Chapter Nine he makes the case for his right to be who he is and do what he does; in the second part, beginning with v19, Paul gives specifics on *how* he does this. In other words, just what does it mean to be, as he says in v19, “a slave to all”?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

v19

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

Let us first examine and dissect this verse in our typical fashion, but then I want to consider it from a second perspective. In v19 Paul states explicitly that which he implied in v17.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:17.

That verse is fairly opaque, and a little hard to understand without digging beneath the surface—which we did in our previous session. But v19 by itself also does a pretty good job of explaining it.

This verse is part of the skeleton holding together the extended passage that begins with v9:1 and concludes with v11:1. *This* passage is nestled within his treatise on eating idol food—Paul is still on-topic—but also represents a strong defense of his apostleship. I say “skeleton” because of his recurring notion of [I am] “free,” “[but I have made myself] *not* free.”

This is his abrupt opening to the passage in v1: “Am I not free?” Then we have this remark in v19: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.” Now skip to the end of this treatise, to 10:31-33.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

We will be returning here in a few moments, but now back to v9:19.

For though I am free from all men,

The context of this paragraph makes it clear that he is talking about *people*, so while the Greek says only “free from all,” the editors can rightly insert “men.” Paul is saying—as we established in our study of the previous paragraph—he is free and belongs to no one; he can take the free gospel to anyone and everyone, free of charge.

free = *eleutheros* = probably from the alternative of <G2064> (erchomai); **unrestrained (to go at pleasure)**, i.e. (as a citizen) not a slave (whether freeborn or manumitted), or (genitive) **exempt (from obligation or liability)** :- free (man, woman), **at liberty**.

I have made myself a slave to all,

Notice first the verb tense; throughout this paragraph (at least through v22) Paul speaks in the past tense: *this is what I have done*. All our common translations retain this pattern in v19 except the original NIV, which, oddly, puts it in the present tense with “I make myself.” Meanwhile, the NKJV softens “slave” to “servant.”

Sidebar: Greek grammar aside, I believe that context and modern interpretation of the two words “servant” and “slave,” demand the word “slave.” We enjoy watching the British series *Downton Abbey*. In that program there are menials that labor below stairs. Yet they are not slaves, but servants, because they are paid a wage (v17: “reward”) Paul has just exhaustively made the case for his working *without* a wage—if he has any reward at all, it is his right to work without being paid! Who is it that works without receiving a wage? A slave.

so that I may win more.

Paul’s determination to obey his Lord permits him to declare, “I have made myself a slave to all.” Yet we know that, at root, it is the Lord Jesus who has declared that Paul will be a slave, in bondage to Him in order to reach “all”—and, by God’s grace, “win more.”

win = *kerdaino* = from <G2771> (kerdos); **to gain** (literal or figurative) :- (get) gain, win; **make profit or gain advantage**.

Paul is probably making a play on words here: his profit or pay is in *souls*, not money (again, the “profit” goes to his Master, not himself). But the profit also goes to those who have been “won.”

Read 1 Corinthians 10:33.

A Deeper Revelation

The preceding tells us what Paul is saying in this verse; it reveals his intense level of obedience and devotion to the Lord. What I would like to address now is how much this verse reveals his *resemblance* to his Lord—which adds a certain veracity to some of his statements, such as the one that concludes this multi-chapter treatise.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:1.

I am sure I am not the only one who has been made slightly uncomfortable by these and similar words by the apostle. On the surface it is very easy to hear a level of arrogance, even pride, in such words, and he has said it before:

Read 1 Corinthians 4:15-16.

It is common for natural man to be influenced by others. The entire fashion industry, for one example, is dependent on that human trait. In the early twentieth century the popular silent film actress, Colleen Moore, bobbed her hair and suddenly every other woman was doing the same. We see models wearing certain clothes in TV ads, so we go out and by the same look—whether or not we have the figure to pull it off. Or on a more positive side, we observe laudable qualities in people we respect, and make an effort to write those qualities into our own life. So even if we do not literally shape our own life after someone else, we are nonetheless influenced by them—which is a form of imitation. In v11:1 Paul says, “Be imitators of me, *just as I also am of Christ.*” (emphasis added)

In v19 and the entire paragraph, Paul states that he has “made myself a slave to all,” that “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.” If Paul is imitating Christ, does this describe Christ Jesus? For a start, Matthew tells us that even the Pharisees considered Jesus to be impartial, egalitarian.

Read Matthew 22:16.

Jesus seemed to pay little heed to the societal rules and norms for his race. We all remember that He accepted invitations to dine with both a Pharisee ([Luke 7:36](#)) and a tax collector, the latter becoming one of his disciples ([Matthew](#)); with another rich tax collector Jesus invited himself to stay at his house ([Zaccheus](#)); against all cultural norms, He sat down and carried on a conversation, alone, with not just a woman, but a hated *Samaritan* woman ([John 4:7-27](#)). Jesus was comfortable speaking with religious leaders and rulers, such as Nicodemus ([John 3:1-21](#)), and prostitutes and fornicators—and everyone in between.

In other words, Jesus became, as Paul says about himself in v22, “all things to all men”—that is to say, Jesus met each person seemingly on his own level, without ceasing to be who He was, or jeopardizing His mission. And the supreme example of this selflessness is that He came to dwell in flesh at all! Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, describes not just this remarkable condescension, but encourages us to imitate it.

Read Philippians 2:3-8.

Paul’s emphasis in Chapter Nine of Corinthians—the thread holding together most of this chapter—is captured in v23: “I do all things for the sake of the gospel.” That, too, is a picture of his Lord; as Paul is imitating, no matter who He was around, no matter how He met them at their own level, Jesus never lost sight of His mission: the good news that He had come to offer salvation *to all*.

So was it arrogance or presumption for Paul to tell the Corinthians (and others) to imitate him? Not at all, because his life and methods were simply in imitation of the life and methods of the Lord Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Remember that in God’s word “sonship” has more to do with *behavior* than bloodline. One is a “son” (or “daughter”) if one looks like, behaves as his father. That is, a good son’s life points back to his father; the father is *recognizable* in the son. Every once in a while I will say something, quite unintentionally, and afterward I will realize, “That’s just what my *dad* would have said.”

It is almost impossible to “imitate” our heavenly Father. We can obey Him, we can worship or praise Him, we can speak to Him. But it is rather difficult to behave or live like a heretofore invisible spirit. This is one reason our Father sent the Son to earth to live in flesh, so that we *could* live like Him.

Jesus told His disciple Philip, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:9). But it is a pretty safe bet that no one in the Corinthian church had seen Jesus, and it is also a pretty safe bet that many, if not most, had never read the Scriptures. But they *had* seen Paul, who was imitating Christ Jesus, the Son, who had “imitated” His Father.

The apostle told the Ephesians to “be imitators of God” (Ephesians 5:1), perhaps because they were further along than the Corinthians. For his reasons, Paul told them to “Be imitators of me” because he was the closest example they had; because *he* was imitating Christ (11:1); and because, like his Lord, he had made himself a slave to all, so that he might win more (9:19).