

*1 Corinthians 9:19-23*

## PREFACE

In our last session we cued up the paragraph before us by examining v19 by itself, where Paul describes himself as a self-made slave “so that I may win more.” We discovered within that a beautiful picture of the servanthood of his Lord and ours. In vv20-23 the apostle uses three groups of people to illustrate and expand what he just said in v19; all of these groups could be and probably were represented in the Corinth church. The groups are:

1. Jews (those “under the Law”),
2. Gentiles (those “without law”),
3. the “weak”

**Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.**

## v20

*To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;*

Because of the division in this verse, some have argued that Paul is referring to two different groups. But “those who are under the Law” can only refer to Jews, so the second portion of his statement just reiterates for emphasis. We might say, “Christians; those who are born again.”

You might protest, “But Paul was a Jew; how could he “[become] as a Jew”? A fair question—which is answered in the second part of the verse: “not being myself under the Law.” Paul was indeed a Jew, from the tribe of Benjamin ([Romans 11:1](#)), but as a converted Christian he was no longer “under the Law.” Nevertheless, to win Jews, to win those who were still under the Law, he would—without compromising “the law of Christ” (v21)—participate in certain “Jewish religious peculiarities” (Fee) such as circumcision ([Acts 16:1-3](#)), food laws, and special observances. Paul could do this as a “free” man who no longer considered such things as having any bearing on his relationship with God. Earlier in this letter he addressed circumcision to the Corinthians.

**Read 1 Corinthians 7:19.**

He would permit no believer in Christ to think that circumcision, or any other Jewish rite or ritual, would improve their standing before God. But if his participation in some of the Jewish customs would keep the door open for his preaching the gospel to them and perhaps winning some for Christ, it was worth it.

**Sidebar:** Note that this demonstrates that Paul did not consider his ministry to the Gentiles to be a hard and fast demarcation, *preventing* him from preaching to Jews. During his first missionary journey with Barnabas, they made the fateful pronouncement.

**Read Acts 13:46.**

But then later, upon entering Corinth, where did he go first? “And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4).

**v21**

*to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.*

Verses 20 and 21 in the more literal NASB and KJVs are translated as written: another one of the apostle’s interminable, long-winded sentences. Thus the “I became” that begins v20 is not included in v21; grammatically it was not required, since it is all one sentence. The other translations break it into two sentences and then insert another “I became.” This makes the verse easier to understand, but less faithful to the original text.

**Sidebar:** Notice, too, one other difference between this verse and v20 that may have escaped your notice. In v20 the Greek text is “*the* Law” (the NASB capitalizes “Law”); this clearly refers to the Mosaic Law, handed down to Israel from God through Moses. But in v21—as translated in the NASB and KJVs—the Greek text is missing the definite article (“*the*”), which is why the NASB then uses “law” (lowercase) in v21.

It is a small point, but since Paul left out the definite article, he could have been insinuating that without the Law of God, one is *utterly* lawless (which is the literal meaning of *anomois*).

Paul here refers to Gentiles—anyone not a Jew. So of course he shapes the gospel message accordingly. To the Jews he could begin with Abraham, Moses and David, leading the audience from them to the promised Messiah, and making the case that Jesus of Nazareth *was* the Messiah. But to Gentiles, for whom there was no such heritage, he must approach from a different direction.

**Read Acts 17:22-25.** (*the beginning of an utterly un-Jewish sermon*)

*Alexander Maclaren:* The second class to whom in his wide sympathies he is able to assimilate himself, is the opposite of the former—the Gentiles who are ‘without law.’ He did not preach on Mars’ Hill as he did in the synagogues. The many-sided Gospel had aspects fitted for the Gentiles who had never heard of Moses, and the many-sided Apostle had links of likeness to the Greek and the barbarian. But here, too, his assimilation of himself to those whom he seeks to win is voluntary; wherefore he protests that he is not without law, though he recognises no longer the obligations of Moses’ law, for he is ‘under [or, rather, “in”] law to Christ.’

I like the way Paul words this qualification. In v20 he stated that he was not himself “under the law,” but now he clarifies that he is not “without the law of God but under the law of Christ.” Gordon Fee does a good job of explaining Paul’s intricate wordplay.

*Fee:* As in the previous clause, he begins, “I became as one without the law, though I myself am not without the law.” But he can scarcely resist a play on words. Among Gentiles he behaves as one who is *anomos* (not under Jewish law), but he is not thereby to be considered *anomos* (“lawless” = “godless, wicked”; cf. 1 Timothy 1:9), which point is made by adding the qualifier “toward God.” Indeed, he goes on, I am *ennomos* (lit. “in law” = subject to law) toward Christ. His point is plain: He wishes no misunderstanding of the word *anomos*, which would ordinarily mean to behave in a godless way. To be “as one without the law” does not mean to be lawless.

### *not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ*

The case could be made that the “law of Christ” would encompass everything He said, every precept He handed down while on earth. But the only other place this phrase is used in the NT gives us a clue as to its specific reference.

### **Read Galatians 6:1-2.**

“Bear[ing] one another’s burdens” is very much like the “new commandment” Jesus handed down to His followers in John’s gospel.

### **Read John 13:34-35.**

This fits perfectly into the context of Chapter Nine in the first Corinthian letter. Even though he is “free from all men” and “not...under the Law,” Paul obeys the law of Christ by going out of his way to deliver the gospel in a way that is understandable to those in these disparate groups. As David Garland writes, “The law of Christ compels his preaching and engenders his desire to make himself a slave to all so that he lives after the pattern of the one who gave His life as a ransom for the many (Mark 10:43-45).”

*To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak;*

We have now reached a point in the text where I must mention the struggle I had early on while studying this passage. Just who are the people in these groups? That is, Is Paul speaking about Jews, Gentiles, and “the weak” *within* the Corinth church, or is he speaking about people in the groups at large, *outside* the church? Here is the nut of the problem: If those *within* the church, why does Paul speak of wanting to “win” them—a word universally associated with conversion? If those *outside* the church, then what is the practical difference between Gentiles “without law” and “the weak”? ([More on this in a moment.](#))

For the most part I found the commentators to be of little help with my quandary. So, as is usually a healthy move, I returned to the text and reexamined, specifically, the verb tense throughout this and the text leading into it. In a general sense, Paul spends most of Chapter Nine defending and justifying the way he goes about his job of evangelizing the gospel. Paul sets the tone of the previous paragraph, vv15-18, in the past tense: “But I **have used** none of these things [rights].” And even though he switches to the present tense as he expands on this statement, the inflection is that he is speaking of the process he has used since he accepted his call from Christ. He is describing his process of “winning” souls for Christ.

As I have pointed out, the current paragraph (vv19-23) is entirely past tense until v23—but then using the present tense only in the same sense as the previous paragraph, still describing his historical method of evangelism. Thus as he is writing to those within the church (Jews and Gentiles alike), he is describing to them the process that heretofore *brought them into the church*.

So, for what it is worth ([I found no commentators who shared this perspective](#)), here is my interpretation: I conclude that “the weak” is not a third category at all, but, just as he referred to the Jews as “the Jews” and then rephrased it as “those who are under the Law,” he is using “the weak” to rephrase both categories above. That is, “the weak” defines both Jews and Gentiles alike, because none of them, prior to conversion (“won”), were under the law of Christ.

**weak** = *asthenes* = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and the base of <G4599> (sthenoo); **strengthless** (in various applications, literal, figurative and moral) :- more **feeble, impotent, sick, without strength**, weak (-er, -ness, thing).

The principal commentators I have been consulting are in agreement that Paul is not speaking here of those weak *in faith* in the church—as in that traditional approach to this letter that sets up the conflict between the weak and the strong within the church. We addressed this some time back, and established that the primary conflict is, instead, between the church and the apostle. No, Paul is speaking about a different category of “the weak.”

### Read Romans 5:6.

That key word that describes every person’s condition prior to conversion is the same word translated “weak” in our text. Whether Jew or Gentile, regarding salvation and a right relationship to God through Christ, all are helpless, impotent, without strength.

And Paul, using the same word, says in v22 that in order to “win the weak” he “became weak.” Note: In the three instances where he said a similar thing about Jews and Gentiles—where he says that he “became *as* a Jew,” and “*as* under the Law,” and “*as* without law—here he says something different: “I became weak” (no “as”). We are reminded of Paul’s conclusion after grappling with his “thorn in the flesh.”

### Read 2 Corinthians 12:8-10.

No matter who these categories represent in our passage, and no matter whether I am right or wrong in my interpretation, the more important point Paul is making—and our important takeaway from this passage—is that the apostle is describing how and why he has “made myself a slave to all” (v19). The why? “so that I may win more.”

*I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.*

To this end he imitates and fashions his life after his Master. There is no better picture of weakness, of helplessness than for the Son of God—second member of the Trinity—to come down to earth as a helpless baby, to take on the weakness and humility of flesh, and to let that flesh be nailed to a cross for the sins of all mankind.

v23

*I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.*

In imitation of his Lord, Paul “does all things” for the sake of saving others, and thereby become, as it were, a *partner* with Christ in the endeavor.

*M. D. Hooker:* Christ became what we are, he was sent into our condition, *in order that* we might become what he is. Paul, in turn, became what the men and women to whom he was proclaiming the gospel were, in order that he might gain them for the gospel.