

## What's Your Ministry? 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

First I want to again thank Sandy Mount and Inetta Smith for their leadership on last Sunday. What they did was in keeping with our scripture for today. They did what they knew to do to advance God's kingdom. Paul is continuing his letter to the Corinthian Christians, asking them to be mature in the faith. He balanced his authority with discipline. He did not have the right to give up his liberty in Christ, but he did have the liberty to give up his rights. Paul gave the Corinthian believers a living example of the principles he was writing about. Shouldn't the stronger believers in the church be able to set aside their rights for the sake of the weaker saints? As you heard last week, was eating meat more important than enriching the church?

Paul was talking about priorities, the things that are really important to us in our lives. It is unfortunate that some Christians have their personal priorities confused and, as a result, are hindering the work of Christ. If each believer was practicing what Jesus said in Matthew 6:33: "...seek first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well," there would be plenty of money for missions, plenty of assistance for service, and the work of the Lord would prosper. But not every Christian is practicing Christian priorities.

In this passage of scripture Paul is explaining to the congregation why he is not willing to accept their support and gives his reasons why.

Paul explains that he did not want to "hinder the Gospel of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:12). In that day, the Greek cities were filled with all kinds of itinerant teachers and preachers, most of whom were out to make money. Not only had Paul refused to use the kind of speech-making and arguments that these teachers used (1 Cor.

2:1–5), but he also refused to accept money from those to whom he ministered. He wanted the message of the Gospel to be free from any obstacles or hindrances in the minds of those that needed it the most, the unsaved.

Paul could not claim any credit for preaching the Gospel, because he had been called of God to preach. “An obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16) God had given Paul a divine stewardship, and “it is required in stewards that a person be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2). God would see to it that Paul would receive his wages and rewards. Paul had the joy of preaching the Gospel without charge! This meant that no one could accuse him of underhanded motives or methods as he shared the Good News of Jesus Christ.

It is unfortunate when the ministry of the Gospel is sometimes hindered by an overemphasis on money. The unsaved world is convinced that most preachers, missionaries and churches are only involved in “religious rackets” to take money from innocent people. We all know that this is true of some religious groups today, people who “use” religion to exploit others and control them. A wrong attitude toward money can and has hindered the Gospel from the earliest days of the church. Unity, we must make sure that nothing we do in our own ministry gives the impression that we are one of their number.

It is told of Dr. H.A. Ironside, pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, when he announced an offering said, “We ask God’s people to give generously. If you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, we do not ask you to give. We have a gift for you—eternal life through faith in Christ!” He wanted to make it clear that the offering was for believers to support the ministry, not for the unbelievers to think he was begging for their donations and miss the opportunity to accept the Gospel.

Paul also explained that his ministry was for the sake of all that had the potential to believe and accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. Paul was free from all,

yet the servant of all! Because he was free, Paul was able to serve others and to set aside his own rights for their sake.

When Paul said he was “all things to all people” he was not saying he was a chameleon who changed his message and methods with each new situation. Nor was Paul a compromiser who adjusted his message to please his audience. He was an ambassador of Christ.

Paul was a Jew who had a great burden for his own people (Rom. 9:1–3; 10:1). But his special calling was to minister to the non-Jews (Eph. 3:8). Whenever he went into a new city, he headed straight for the synagogue, if there was one, and boldly shared the Gospel. If he was rejected by the Jews, then he turned to the non-Jews. In that day the things that separated Jews and non-Jews were the Law and the covenants (Eph. 2:11–15). In his personal life, Paul lived so that he did not offend either the Jews or the non-Jews. He did not show off his liberty before the Jews, nor did he impose the Law on the non-Jews.

Some may think that Paul was behaving in an inconsistent manner. But he simply adapted his approach to different groups. When you read his sermons in the Book of Acts, you see this wise adaptation. When he preached to Jews, he started with the Old Testament patriarchs; but when he preached to non-Jews, he began with the God of Creation. Paul did not have a “stock sermon” for all occasions. He had Jesus as his example who talked spiritual birth with Nicodemus and living water with the Samaritan woman at the well.

To immature people, Paul’s lifestyle probably looked inconsistent. In reality, he was very consistent, because his overriding purpose was to win people to Jesus Christ. Consistency can become a very legalistic thing, and a person can become so bound by human-made rules and standards that they have no freedom to minister.

Paul had the right to eat whatever pleased him, but he gave up that right so that he might win the Jews. Paul revered the Law (see Rom. 7:12), but set that aside to

reach the non-Jews. He even identified himself with the legalistic weak Christians so that he could help them to grow. It was not compromise, but rather abandonment to the higher law of love. Paul followed the example of the Savior and humbled himself to become the servant of all. <sup>1</sup>

So the question for this sermon is what is your ministry? You may be saying what does this have to do with me? It has everything to do with you. What is it that God has put on your heart and mind to do for the kingdom of God? How do you share and show your faith with others?

Leroy and I went on vacation last Saturday and returned yesterday. My daughter-in-law, Samara asked if I met any interesting people. The answer was yes, but those that I found most precious were unnamed and will never know that I am a minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The first was a young woman who was having lunch in the upper restaurant and I noticed that she was crying. The reason I paid attention was that she hugged one of the wait staff, but when she returned to her table she continued to cry. I went over and asked if she was alright and she said she was having a horrible day but would be alright. I said I had noticed her tears and I would pray for her. She thanked me and I returned to my table determined to keep my promise of holding her in prayer, just asking God to have mercy on whatever was her situation. The next day she came up to me and I didn't even recognize her at first, but she hugged me and thanked me for the prayers saying it was a much better day. What I am saying is she didn't need a sermon, she needed someone to show they cared and to show the love of God.

Another day I met a young lady sitting on the stairs saying that she had eaten too much for the third day of the cruise and we had four more days to go. We

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. 1 Co 9:15

laughed and said we need to pace ourselves. The next time I saw her I asked how the pacing was going and she said she was working on it. By the third time we met she said she was skipping dinner. On our fourth meeting we learned each other's names and she said things were rough. I reminded her that even on vacation there were people that needed our consideration and encouragement. On our last meeting she said the previous day had been very traumatic even to the point where she and her son had to be seen by the very arrogant ship's doctor. She also explained that her son had autism and this vacation was for him. I discovered that she was one of those very persons that was not having fun, but need a word of encouragement and care and to know that God was still the one in control.

The other interesting persons that I met were also unnamed. One was a tour guide who did his best to entertain us, but who had apparently offended some of his guests. He was a college student working his way through school and playing soccer for half his tuition. He joked about having so many girlfriends because girls outnumbered boys more than 3 to 2 on the island. For all his efforts a lady yesterday morning had demanded a partial refund of her money because she did not like his conversation nor the fact that it rained during part of the tour and she could not get out to purchase more stuff. But that same tour guide took us to a village of descendants from Honduran slaves who did a welcome dance for us and made their simple crafts available for sale. The guide explained that parents had to pay for their children's education, books and uniforms. So although I did not speak their language (they spoke neither Spanish nor English, but an African dialect) I felt compelled to help by purchasing a craft.

I met staff that worked tirelessly to give excellent service for us to enjoy our vacation, restaurant staff who work the breakfast, lunch and dinner (about 14 hours per day for 6 months at a time); stewards who didn't see the light of day because they spent their time cleaning up after me and the other guests. How we minister is

to be courteous and kind, generous and respectful. We try to be a blessing to all, especially those who bless us.

There have been times I have been embarrassed to be a tourist because of how badly my fellow Americans have behaved, but in each country we were invited to return and bring our resources because for many tourism is more than 25% of their economy.<sup>2</sup>

Like Paul your ministry should be a privilege. It should not be something that you do for praise and recognition, but for the privilege of being a servant of the Most High God, as an opportunity of service.

Paul also saw his ministry as a duty, given to him by God, which he was willing and compelled to do whether or not he was paid. He knew that God would reward him for his faithfulness in sharing the good news with others. Those of you who are teacher understand this better than most. You could have worked in other fields and gotten paid much more money, but when God calls one to be a teacher, the reward is in the work and the results accomplished.

Paul, the master missionary, who won more people for Christ than any other man, saw how essential it was to meet people where they were, get to know them, relate to them and then and only then invite them to meet Jesus. So often we want to talk about ourselves and we don't listen to learn about the other person. We need to learn to be like Paul, and learn the art of getting alongside people and getting to know them.<sup>3 4</sup>

So what is your ministry? For some of us it is just to listen carefully to others' stories. So many people don't need our advice, but our listening ear, our love and

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<sup>2</sup>Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:523

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters to the Corinthians*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 81

<sup>4</sup>Ellingworth, Paul ; Hatton, Howard ; Ellingworth, Paul: *A Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*. New York : United Bible Societies, 1995 (UBS Handbook Series; Helps for Translators), S. 205

our encouragement. They don't want to know about this Jesus that we serve until they know that we care. Paul said: "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 so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the 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.

God calls us all to ministry to do what we can for the cause of Christ and so that we can share in the blessings of the Gospel. Amen.