

CCLEB SERMON

NOTES

SUNDAY AUGUST 11, 2024
1 CORINTHIANS 9:20-27

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OVERHEAD

Let's get started. We're in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 9. A tough old cowboy from Texas was counseling his granddaughter, and he told her that if she wanted to live a long life, she should follow his advice. The granddaughter did that religiously until she died at the age of 103. When she died, she left behind 14 children, 30 grandchildren, 45 great-grandchildren, 25 great-great-grandchildren, and a 40-foot hole where the crematorium used to be.



We know that sometimes the wrong kind of words we share in the workplace as Christians can build up and create a major explosion. Paul tells us how to avoid that trap. This is a very practical lesson today, so let's dig in.



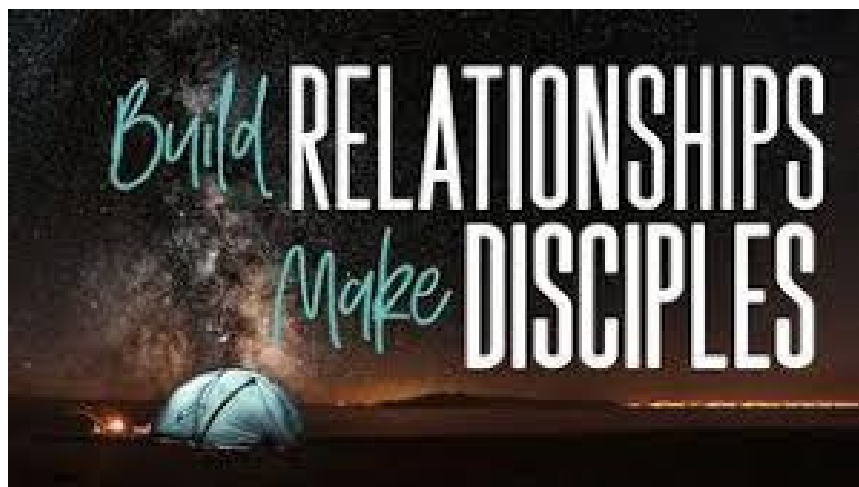
1 Corinthians 9:20: "When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law, even though I am not subject to the law. I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law. When I'm with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so that I can bring them to Christ."

But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. When I'm with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and to share its blessings."

Now, here in these verses, because Paul wants the entire world to be saved, he breaks all of mankind down into three distinct categories: first, the Jews; second, the Gentiles; and third, the weak.



First, the Jews. In **1 Corinthians 9:20 (NIV)**, it says, "To the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews." Paul says that to the Jews, "I became like a Jew to win them to Christ." The NLT says, "I became one of them so that I could bring them to Christ."



Paul was serious about this. In fact, the most extreme example of Paul following his own counsel on this is found in Acts 16, when Paul first called Timothy to the ministry. **Acts 16:1**: "Paul first went to Derbe and then to Lystra, where there was a young disciple named Timothy. His mother was a Jewish believer, but his father was a Greek. Timothy was well thought of by the believers in Iconium, so Paul wanted him to join them on their journey. In deference to the Jews in the area, he arranged for Timothy to be circumcised before they left, for everyone knew that his father was a Greek."

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- ACTS 16:3

So here, Paul asked Timothy to be circumcised. Why? In deference to the Jews in the area. To me, this is absolutely amazing, because it seems to clearly contradict what Paul says so strongly in Galatians concerning circumcision, where he strongly condemns those who demand that Gentiles, which is what Timothy was, be circumcised. Listen to Galatians 5, Paul speaking: "I wish that those who are troubling you by teaching that circumcision is necessary for salvation would even go all the way and castrate themselves."

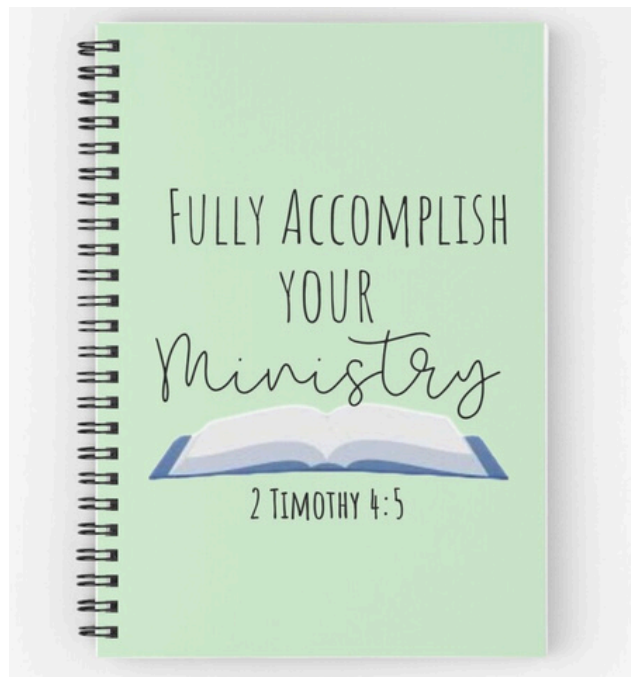


That's pretty strong, and yet back in Acts, Paul asked Timothy, a Gentile, to be circumcised. How can that be? Isn't that a contradiction? No, because although Paul knew that Timothy's ministry among circumcised Jews would be impeded by him not being circumcised, he asked Timothy to let his love for the unsaved Jews take him past his liberty, which permitted him not to be circumcised, to a higher liberty—a liberty that called him to be circumcised to further the ministry. This is exactly what Paul says in **verse 20**: "When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law." Timothy being circumcised, even though I am not subject to the law—even though Timothy did not have to be circumcised—I did this so that I could bring to Christ those who are under the law. This is exactly what Paul says here.

You know, we too make some accommodations when we are in different settings, based on where people are on different issues.

Just to give a 5-minute update on the auction—some of these churches were very conservative, like the Church of the Brethren, where they didn't wear ties and dressed in plain suits. So, I would take my tie off and sometimes unbutton my top button because that's how they dressed. Now, I could have claimed liberty. I could have gone in there and said, "I'm not bound by your law; I'm free from that. I can wear a tie if I want to." But, for the furtherance of ministry, we make those accommodations.

Lauren Wong was asked to speak in a conservative church in the area, and she called my wife and asked, "How should I dress? What's appropriate?" because she knew my wife knew this church. Lauren has some tattoos, and she asked, "Should I cover them up?" I don't remember what Sue said, but knowing that church, it probably would have been better to cover them up because it might have gotten in the way of ministry. You see, we make those accommodations out of love. Do we have the liberty not to? Of course. But love takes us beyond the liberty we have in some of those instances.



Then, in verse 21, Paul shifts to how we are to go about winning Gentiles to the Lord, which is where most of us live on a daily basis.

1 Corinthians 9:21: "When I'm with the Gentiles"—and a Gentile is anyone who's not a Jew—"who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so that I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ."

Concerning Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, here in Greek, the word used means "destitute of" or "lacking in" Mosaic law. In other words, these are people who don't have the Bible; they don't know the Bible. It's very important to note that Paul is not saying that Gentiles are not guilty before God of breaking the law simply because they don't have the Mosaic law. In Romans, God makes it abundantly clear that every single human being will be held accountable someday for their sins. Romans 2:12 makes that clear: "When the Gentiles sin, they will be destroyed even though they never had God's written law, and the Jews who do have God's law will be judged by that law when they fail to obey it."



So, on what basis will they be judged if they don't have the law? Romans 2:14: "Even Gentiles who do not have God's written law show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it." How is that possible? How is that possible? "For their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right."

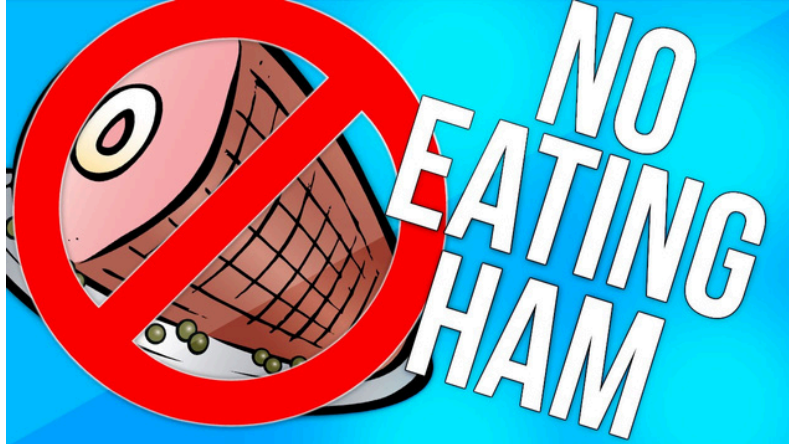
One should not focus on the differences between people but look for commonality and similarity.

Thinking Point

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Paul says here in **verse 21** that he tries to fit in with the Gentiles as much as he can in order to win them to Christ. This manner is one where we should not focus on the differences between people but look for commonality and similarity. Paul did this, as proved in Acts 17, when he was witnessing to a group of Gentiles. Paul quoted from Gentile secular literature in order to build a bridge. **Acts 17:28**: "He's witnessing to Gentiles. He says, 'For in him we live and move and exist,' as some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" Also, in that chapter, during the same witnessing, he says this: "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship"—all these pagan idols—"I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an unknown God.' So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you." Again, he found these things as a bridge.

Note the difference Paul draws between Jews and Gentiles here. Paul says that when he's with the Jews, he keeps the law to win some. When Paul was with the Jews, he did not eat ham.



But when he's with the Gentiles, he disregards the Jewish law to win some. So, when Paul was with the Gentiles, he might have had a nice big ham sandwich.



Listen to what he says in **9:21**: "To those not having the law, I become like one not having the law—though I am not free from God's law, but am under Christ's law—so as to win those not having the law."

Let me give an example from work. Let's say at work, your coworker uses the Lord's name in vain. I remember when I first gave my life to Christ, a seasoned Christian told me that when that happens at work, he gets right up in the person's face and says, "Don't you ever use the name of my Lord that way again." Very strong. And when he said that, I thought, "Wow, that's powerful." But is that what Paul is advocating here? No. Paul says, "I try to find common ground, not ground that divides." Is what they do right? Of course not. But how do we respond to it?

If my coworker feels condemned by me, it will break my relationship with him. And no relationship means no influence. Don't ever forget that—no relationship, no influence. Every time you break a relationship, you're losing influence. If you want to be a Christian influence in the life of your unsaved friend, you must have a relationship. No relationship, no influence.



1 Corinthians 5:9-13 makes the point that we're not to judge those who are unsaved and acting in these kinds of ways. This is from Chapter 5, Paul writing: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy, or swindlers, or idolaters. In that case, you would have to leave this world." But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside."

So, here's the underlying issue: until my coworker becomes a believer and the Holy Spirit begins teaching him, he will not feel conviction because he doesn't have the Holy Spirit convicting him that these things are wrong. The goal then becomes to lead them to Christ so that the Holy Spirit begins to flow in them, convicting them of these things. That conviction will not come until the Holy Spirit is in them.



Think of it like this: there was no cable TV out on the streets or highways, but I figured it would come someday, so I wired my house for cable. I did it myself—I ran the cable, put in the boxes, and waited. But there was nothing flowing through those cables until the connection was made outside. Every human being that God created is pre-wired for the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit does not start flowing through that "cable" until the switch is flipped on—representing when they accept Christ as their Savior. Then the conviction comes, and the Holy Spirit begins working in their lives. So that becomes the objective.

You might ask, "What about at work when someone begins telling a dirty joke?" You know what I suggest? Maybe just give a little smile so it doesn't look like you're condemning them, and then just walk away. Just walk away. They'll get it—they'll understand. But you don't condemn. They don't know the Lord. Remember, in **1 Corinthians 5**, Paul says, "It is not my responsibility to judge the unsaved. God will judge the unsaved." Be winsome to some in order to win some.

Then in **verse 22**, Paul addresses the third and final group: "To the weak, I become weak to win the weak." The key word here is "weak." Twenty translations all use the word "weak." In the CEV, it says, "When I am with people whose faith is weak." The word for "weak" here means lacking in discernment and decision-making about lawful and unlawful things—someone who lacks the discernment to be able to make decisions about what is lawful and unlawful.



Now, it helps for context to see that this exact same word is used in people's decisions to eat meat or not to eat. For someone with a weak conscience—an inability to discern between what's legal and not legal to God—seeing you with all your knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed? It's the same idea.

Personally, I believe Paul is referring here to those who are either newly saved or still immature legalistic believers, whom the Bible consistently describes as those with weak faith—still questioning, still undecided, still uncertain about the liberty they have concerning lawful and unlawful things.

An example in Paul's day was eating meat offered to idols. Or, in our day, washing your car on a Sunday or having a Christmas tree. My father never washed the car or mowed the lawn on a Sunday. So, I have a personal conviction not to do that. If I drive by your house and see you washing a car, am I going to come in and read you the riot act? No, I'm not. That's my conviction. I can't and should not impose that on you. But it is my conviction. If I tried to impose that on you, my faith would be weak because I would become legalistic over an issue that is not an issue to God.



So, what does that look like? Well, sometimes when people get saved, and they get radically saved and want to obey God at all costs, they will come to me—and this happens more than you might think—and say, "I was reading about the Christmas tree. Did you know the Christmas tree is evil? Do you know the roots of the Christmas tree?" Or they'll say, "Did you know that the bunny rabbit is wicked? Do you know the roots, the source, of the bunny rabbit?" And they want engagement. So, do I put them down? Do I make fun of them for their view? No, because as Paul points out, that would create a wall between us. Instead, I gently address the Christmas tree issue. I try to lead them to a little softer view, but I don't let that divide us. I don't say, "You're an idiot, what are you talking about?"



You know, it's like **Titus 3:9**, "Do not get involved in foolish discussions about spiritual pedigrees or in quarrels and fights about obedience to Jewish laws. These things are useless and a waste of time." Useless and a waste of time.

And why does Paul do all of this—all that we've been reading? Why does he do this? In **verses 22 and 23**: "When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings."

Paul says that he does all of this for two reasons: one, to win others to Christ, and two, to share with them in the joy of their salvation. And folks, what a joy it is to be used by God to lead another person to Christ. I personally don't believe there is a higher joy that a person can experience than when they sit and pray a prayer to receive Jesus with someone. By the grace of God, I've never been caught up in drugs or alcohol. I have a lot of other sins, a lot of other shortcomings, but by God's grace, I've never been involved in that. But when I lead someone to Christ, when God uses me to do that, there's nothing that compares to it, because you're touching a priority that touches eternity.

And I think these closing verses point to the fact that we must train ourselves, discipline ourselves to make God's priority our priority. And if you make God your top priority, what automatically should become your top priority? Well, do we know what God's top priority is? Is it fair to assume that God's greatest priority would be what He paid the greatest price to achieve? And what did He pay the greatest price to achieve? His Son's death on the cross for the salvation of mankind.



So then, if we want our top priority to be God's top priority, it automatically becomes winning the lost—at work, at home, at school. You know, God has carefully choreographed you into the lives of people where you work. It's not by chance. You may think it's just really bad luck that you're stuck with the people that you're stuck with, but the truth is, it's not by chance. And I've often said that the primary work that you do in your workplace is incidental to the great work that God wants to do through you in that workplace: winning people, directing people, pointing people, leading people, helping people to get to Jesus.

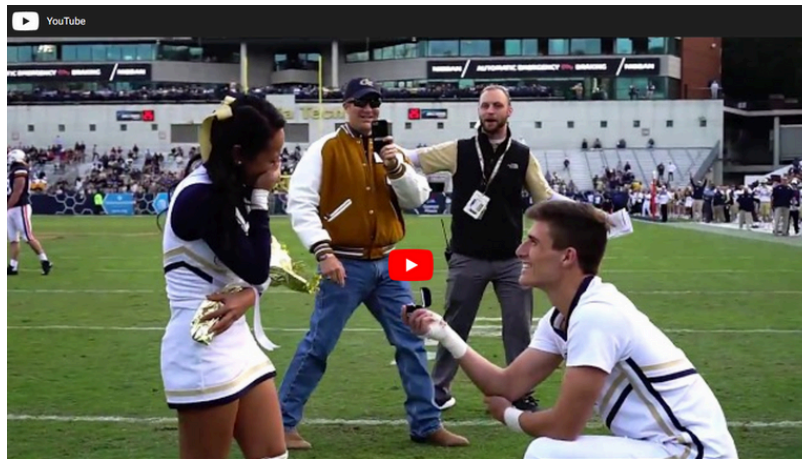
As a part of this, Paul likens our Christian faith journey in **verse 24** to a race. Now, the Corinthians would have really enjoyed this analogy because it was in the city of Corinth where the yearly Isthmian Games were held, second only to the Olympic Games, which, by the way, were started in 776 BC. Let me read this: "Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I'm not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others, I myself might be disqualified."



So again, Paul likens our Christian faith journey to a race. And speaking of this race, Paul says that he runs to win. I remember a couple of years ago, I heard John MacArthur on our radio station saying that he would never call a man to the ministry unless he had a competitive spirit. The first time I heard that, I kind of reacted, but the more I thought about it, I thought, you know, that competitive spirit, under the control of the Holy Spirit, motivates the believer to do all that Paul is advocating for—to win some, to work at that, to be disciplined, to do that, to work at that.



And in **verse 25**, he says the world does this for a prize that will fade away, but we do this for an eternal prize. Paul says, "So run straight to the goal." Imagine a football player with the ball in his arms at the 50-yard line with a clear path to the end zone, but he stops along the sideline to flirt with a cheerleader who's caught his eye.



Unthinkable! The same should be true of how we run our race. Don't get distracted by shiny objects along the sidelines.



Paul says, "I discipline my body." Note that Paul says nothing about a personal trainer pushing him, cajoling him to do all of this. Did you ever think about this? That in every area of life, we have people in our lives to encourage us, to motivate us, sometimes even force us to do what we should do. At a factory, you have a supervisor. And yet, in the most important arena of our lives, there's no one like this.



Imagine what a factory would look like with no management—chaos. Imagine what a school would look like with no teachers or administration. And this is why the self-discipline that Paul calls for here is so critically important to you and me because unlike at work, it is you and you alone who will see to it that you do or do not keep up with your discipline of Bible reading and prayer. Because without those, I promise you, you will fall to the back of the pack and you will not win the race because you will be distracted by shiny objects along the way.



I remember Billy Graham said the things that take out pastors and ministers are pride, money, and morals. I've prayed about that for years, and the more I think about it, those things take everyone out. If there's something that takes us out, it's pride, money, or morals—shiny things. And I believe this is exactly why self-discipline is so important.

Sue and I don't have any biological children, but every ten years or so, what I would look for in a husband for my daughter would have changed based on where I've been in life. And where I am right now, at the age of 70, if I had a daughter, the first non-negotiable is that he'd have to know the Lord. That's number one, obviously. But the second thing I would look for is self-discipline. Because listen, he can say all the right things, but if he doesn't have the self-discipline to get there, nothing's going to happen. Words, words, words—but self-discipline is so critically important. If you don't have that trainer in your spiritual journey...

When I used to appoint people to management at the dealership who had never been in management, it usually ended up this way: a week or two later, they would come up to me and say they're like a glorified babysitter. I would say, "Welcome to management!" right? But we don't get that in our spiritual lives. We don't get that mentor to push us along, so you need to discipline yourself.

I believe this is exactly what Paul is pointing to in his closing words when he says, "I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others, I myself might be disqualified." He doesn't want to pay that price. I remember years ago, someone said something that I never forgot: "Don't go to the bench early. Don't go to the bench early. Don't be disqualified by something foolish you do later in your life, as King David was." So, be careful.

So how does today's lesson apply to me? There's a lot we could say, but I'm going to focus on just one point because it is so vitally important to winning others to Christ. Last week, I heard a longtime friend talk about when he first got saved. He got radically saved—zealous, on fire. And he said he got fired from four jobs because of his, in his words, "zeal for God." He worked in the construction industry, and you know how that is. He continually told his unsaved coworkers how their lives offended both him and God. He would say, "You're living with your girlfriend; that's a sin," or "You're drinking all weekend; that's wrong." And of course, they just loved him for that. One of his coworkers got so mad at what he was saying that, after they had just framed a wall and were setting it up on the second floor of a house, he pushed it over the edge. And he got fired from that job.



Listen, remember this: until that switch gets flipped—until they get saved—they won't feel guilty or convicted about anything you tell them.



The goal, therefore, is to get that switch turned on, to get them saved, and to get the convicting power of the Holy Spirit flowing through them. Then you will hear things like, "You know, I'm feeling bad about some things that I never felt bad about before. What's that about?" And I say, "That's the Holy Spirit."



I have a very mixed group of people around me, and I love this church for that reason. Many of you love it for the same reason—we're just such a diverse bunch of people, and I love it. I used to go home from our Monday night Bible study and say to Sue after everybody left, "I mean, it almost reminded me of a Star Wars bar scene with all those different characters." And on the way home, I'd just think, "I love this church."

There's a woman who used to make money doing things she shouldn't have done. Then she got saved, and a couple of weeks later, she came to Bible study. She said, "Hey, I got a question." The Holy Spirit was now convicting her of things. He wants to give you true joy, and He knows all those things are getting in the way. Jesus doesn't take things away from us to rob us of joy; He takes them away so He can give us real joy. Those things get in the way.

The same is true with you, right? Listen, no one ever cleaned you up, and no one ever cleaned me up. People came alongside and loved me, but in the end, it was the Holy Spirit that cleaned us up. We want to have a culture that loves and accepts people where they are, that is open to hearing the Word. We want to love them where they are—not sign off on their sin, but love them where they are—and let the Word of God hammer them. Because, listen, when the Holy Spirit convicts someone, that person will feel conviction, not condemnation. They will never feel condemnation from the Word of God—they won't. If I try to become the Holy Spirit, they will feel condemnation, and that works against the cause. You've got to win some.