

Willing to Sacrifice for Gospel Blessings

Culture of Grace: Practices & Habits of GracePoint Church / 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Introduction:

This morning, we are looking at another practice and habit we want to prioritize as part of our Culture of Grace series before returning to our study of the gospel of Mark next week. The practice we are considering today is to willingly sacrifice our freedoms and rights for the sake of the gospel, which is undoubtedly difficult for us to embrace, especially as Americans. We have a particularly hard time with this concept because it is ingrained in us to fight for our rights. We fight for various rights and freedoms we have as citizens of this country and quote amendments like they are Biblical truths. I am not saying those things aren't true, but I want to show how God says, though we may have those rights, followers of Christ should actively and willingly sacrifice our rights and freedoms for the sake of the gospel. We learn this from the beginning of Jesus' gospel proclamation. Jesus says in Matthew 16:24-25, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Do we realize what Jesus is saying? Following Him means denying ourselves completely and choosing to take up our cross, which means choosing to die to our plans and live as though we are heading to a certain death. Church, that is the true call of Christ, yet we have softened that call in the church. We follow Christ partially. We hold onto our rights, complaining when they are hindered in any way, and fight with others when we feel them slipping away. We need to be reminded that the call of Christ is so much more. And pay attention to what Jesus said at the end of Matthew 16:25, "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Not might find it, will find it. We will find true life when we follow Christ like this. We will find true blessing, true happiness, true liberty when we deny ourselves and willingly sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. That is what our passage today drives home as we see the example of how Paul lived for the sake of the gospel and the purpose behind it. Before we get there, let's set the context of these verses. Our passage is part of a beautifully crafted teaching that goes from 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1, answering a simple question about whether it's right to eat food sacrificed to idols. You see, Corinth was a metropolitan city with many temples and many gods. Meals in the temples were not only a religious activity but a social one, central to life in the city. The sacrificial food was used in several ways. Some of it was part of the sacrifice, some eaten in the temple, and some sold in the market. So, the question is multifaceted, addressing both whether it was right to eat in the temple and to buy sacrificial food from the market. Some said yes to both because of the freedom they have in Christ and their knowledge of an idol being nothing. Others said no because they would be defiled by the food since it was connected to idols. This seems like a simple and almost trite question, doesn't it? But Paul recognizes there is something deeper going on and shows the answer is more complex than we might think. In Chapter 8, Paul calls the church to consider how their exercise of the freedom to eat this food might cause others to stumble. In chapter 9, Paul shares how he refused to insist on various rights he had in order to serve others. The first half of Chapter 10 gives a clear call to flee from idolatry, teach against eating in the temples, followed by a call to consider one's conscience when eating food from the marketplace in a private setting towards the end of chapter 10. Finally, Paul concludes his teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 with a call to follow his example of giving no offense to anyone, and saying, in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Our passage, in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, is connected to the example Paul calls us to follow and imitate, as we follow Christ. I see two main points from Paul's example in this passage around how we should live for the gospel and the purpose in living this way. Consider the first point with me in verses 19-22,

We Should Willingly Sacrificing Our Rights to Serve and Save Others

In verses 1-18 of chapter 9, Paul reveals that though he has the right to things like enjoying food, taking a wife, and receiving financial care from this church, he has made no use of these rights in order to keep any obstacle from hindering the proclamation and reception of the gospel.

Then, he gives the reason for living this way, starting in verse 19. Look there with me, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.” First, Paul says he is “free from all,” meaning he is not bound to conform to the expectations or requirements of any person. But notice how, though this is true, Paul says he made himself “a servant to all.” The term for servant means being enslaved to another person. Consider what he is saying. He is saying that while he has complete freedom to live without any outside constraints by other people, he voluntarily makes himself a slave to others. Just in case we are tempted to think he is not calling us to live like this and only showing what he did, listen to what Paul says in Galatians 5:13, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Using the same Greek word for serve that speaks of being enslaved to another, Paul says that our freedom should be used to serve others in love. His example in our passage and Galatians 5:13 shows the true exercise of freedom in Christ is the freedom to love by serving others. We will circle back around to the purpose statement at the end of verse 19 in a minute. Look with me at verses 20-22, to see how Paul shows what this servitude looked like, “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 (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” Paul gives four different categories of people and declares how he “became as” each of them, meaning he adjusted his way of life to conform to their practices in any way he could. And we will see this meant sacrificing rights and freedoms he had to do this. The first category of people is kind of a shocking statement because Paul was a Jew, yet he says he “became as a Jew.” Paul shows us his primary identity was no longer in his ethnicity but in his relationship with Christ. The second category becoming “as one under the law,” is connected to the first, though distinct because it includes Gentiles who converted to Judaism. When he says he became as a Jew, and as one under the law, he is referring to the cultural customs and practices of Jews, particularly related to the Mosaic Law. This would mean choosing to still live bound by the ceremonial, dietary, and separation laws of the Old Testament. Things like dietary restrictions, festival observances, and circumcision that Christians were not bound to. Paul is saying that though he wasn’t bound by these things, he lived like he was when engaging with those under the law. If he needed to eat certain things he would. If he needed to celebrate a certain day, he did. There two strong examples of this from the book of Acts. First, where he has Timothy, who had a Jewish mother and Greek father, circumcised in order to cause no offense to the Jews when they were ministering around them in Acts 16:3. The second is in Acts 21:20-26 where Paul observes the law through performing the Nazarite vow to cause no offense among the Jews who were questioning his teaching around the law of Moses. In these instances, Paul willingly confirmed to the practices of Judaism in order to leave no obstacle in the way of the gospel. However, we see Paul says clearly in our passage that he is no longer under the law. Paul confirms these things are not required to be made right with God, but he shows how he willingly came under them for gospel advancement. Now, it is important to note that when these things became a hindrance to the gospel, Paul would not comply. We see this in Galatians 2:1-5 where Paul describes how Titus was not forced to be circumcised, as a Greek, so the truth of the gospel would be preserved. Paul would adjust and sacrifice when it served the gospel, but not when it would compromise the truth. Paul then shows how he sacrificed for Gentiles in verses 21-22. Look there with me, “To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.” Pause there to consider these two categories more closely. We know Paul means Gentiles not converted to Judaism by saying “those outside the law” because was just speaking about those under the law. These are people not bound by the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law. He is saying he became as one not bound by the law when engaging with these people. However, don’t miss his qualifier here.

He says he is “not outside the law of God but under the law of Christ.” He is not saying he threw off the law of God entirely of there is an entirely new law of Christ. Paul is saying he remained under everything connected to the Old Testament that is perpetuated in the law of Christ. Tom Schreiner helps clarify what Paul is saying here commenting, “The law of Christ includes the moral norms of the Old Testament law, as Romans 13:8–10 indicates. Those laws continue to be authoritative, not because they are part of the Mosaic law, but because they constitute God’s character” (Thomas R. Schreiner, 1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary, 192). Paul was willing to adjust his way of life to live like one no longer bound by things that separated Jews from Gentile, like the dietary restrictions, a strict observance of the Sabbath, and circumcision, though never compromising the moral norms that remain as part of the law of Christ. Paul is showing how he refused to hold onto any practice not perpetuated in Christ which would keep him from effective gospel ministry to the gentiles. He expounds on his ministry to the Gentiles when he speaks of the weak in verse 22. These are connected to his teaching about weak of conscience in chapter 8. However, here Paul is speaking of non-believers where in chapter 8 he speaks of believers. Paul is saying he is willing to refrain from freedoms that his conscience would allow him to enjoy for the sake of Gentile unbelievers, who may have been hindered from seeing the truth of the gospel if he were to exercise them. In this example, he is subtly moving us to consider how much more should we be willing to sacrifice our rights for those inside of the church. Paul was willing to live in a way that was even sensitive to the cultural sensitives of the weak. Now, make sure you see the reason he chooses to sacrifice like this. Look back at verses 19-22 and note the consistent refrain. In verse 19 he says the purpose of becoming a servant to all is that he “might win more of them.” He repeats the same purpose with each category. He wants to “win Jews... win those under the law... win those outside the law,” and “win the weak.” Then, he concludes by saying. “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” He uses the term for “win” 5 times in 3 verses as a synonym for the word save at the end of verse 22. Winning these people meant saving them. It meant having them see the glory of Jesus Christ in the gospel and turning to repent of their sin, receive forgiveness, and follow Jesus. Paul was willing to sacrifice his rights and serve all people in order to save them. Notice he says “to save some.” Paul knows that his efforts won’t save everyone, but even if some of them are saved it is worth this kind of sacrifice. What would happen if we all learned how to live like this? What if stopped fighting for our rights and instead laid them down for the sake of others seeing the glory of Jesus Christ? Church, that is what God’s word is calling us to do, which brings us to the second point. See, Paul didn’t just do this for the sake of people. He ultimately did this for a very pointed purpose, revealing how,

We Sacrifice to Share in Gospel Blessings

After showing how he curbs his freedoms and rights to remove all obstacles for the gospel, serving other to save some, Paul reveals to us his ultimate motivation in verse 23, and we need to see this to have this really capture our hearts. Look closely at verse 23 with me, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” Everything Paul does is for the sake of the gospel. That is what moves him to sacrifice like this. He has been so captivated by the message of the gospel that Christ came to save sinners, dying in their place to provide forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation with their Creator, that he is willing to sacrifice whatever rights he may have to make it known. And notice what he says at the end of verse 23, “that I may share with them in its blessings.” Sharing means being a partaker of. Why is the gospel worth living in sacrifice like this? Because we want to partake of the blessings of the gospel. Church, there are great blessings of the gospel. These blessings come in this life through having peace with God, joy in communion with Him, the comfort of His love, and the fellowship of His Spirit, but more than that, the greatest blessing is eternal life with God in the new heavens and new earth where there is no need for the sun because His glory shines so brightly, where there is no more pain and sorrow, where he wipes away every tear, where he satisfies us with the greatest pleasure of His presence forever. Paul lives like this because of he longs for those blessings. And that should be the motivation for us to sacrifice as well. That is why we should be willing to give up our rights to serve and save others.

As we live like this, we are true disciples of Christ, and we will share in its blessings with all who call upon the name of Christ for all eternity. Christ Jesus died to purchase our redemption. He died to make us new creations who live for His glory in this world and enjoy His glory for all of eternity. That is what His death on the cross secured, that is what forgiveness of our sins secures. When you believe the gospel, and turn to Christ for forgiveness, you receive the Spirit as a guarantee of these blessings. Do you believe that truth? Do you believe that gospel? If you do, the Word of God is calling you to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Him. It is calling you to be willing to sacrifice your rights for the sake of the gospel, to share in gospel blessings.

Conclusion:

As I mentioned, Paul concludes this whole section of teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 by saying, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” The call of Christ isn’t to partially follow him, It is to deny ourselves, taking up our cross, and sacrificing in the same ways he did as a way of imitating Christ, so the gospel is held up for all to see. So, what could this sacrifice look like for you? I hesitate to give specific examples because I think this can call each of us to respond in different as God personally exposes what we might be unwilling to lay down for the sake of the gospel. The main question we should ask ourselves is how could I willingly setting aside personal freedoms and rights for the sake of the gospel? Maybe it is the right to free speech and freedom to share your opinions on cultural matters. I can’t tell you how many times I hear people claim the first amendment to excuse their slander and dishonor of other people, especially political figures. Maybe the call is lay that freedom down and choose to hold your tongue, refusing say snarky comments about the political party that differs from yours so you don’t cause offense and allow the gospel to shine. Refuse to let your any political ideal to become a barrier for others to come to Christ. Maybe you could lay aside the freedom to drink and eat whatever we may like. Would you give up eating pork to be able to invite some of our Muslim neighbors to your home serve for a meal that is halal? Maybe drinking wine in moderation causes someone to stumble, so you choose not to drink around them, or give up drinking entirely. Could the call be to sacrifice the freedom to spend your money and use your time however you would like? Maybe the call for you is to take that step of going to the mission field and choosing to learn a culture different than your own, which would include sacrificing the freedoms we enjoy in America. Most often, I think this means making a conscience choice not to cling so tightly to our freedoms in various moments and consistently laying them down to save others. I don’t know what it is for you but I encourage you to search your heart and see if any of the freedoms and rights you cling to might be hindering you from living for the sake of gospel blessing. As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of response, ask the Lord to open your eyes to the ways you may need to willingly sacrifice for the sake of the gospel. If He leads you to, feel the freedom to come down and kneel before him, or come receive prayer for a member of our prayer teams. You will find them worshipping in the front row or in the back with lanyards on. Church, press into God’s grace in this time, pray for Him to move in your heart, sing for your heart and those around you.

Let’s pray as we enter this time of response.