



5. A Passion for people

(1 Cor 9:16-27)

I've been wanting to preach on this passage for some time and this particular time in this particular series seems a good opportunity to do so. It's quite a controversial passage that goes right to the heart of how we communicate with people.

Let's recap on where we have been in this series. We discovered that God is a missionary God. He has a passion for us and that passion was revealed in His Son who expressed that passion for us in His sufferings.

We discovered that we are a missionary church - as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you! His mission is our mission. We are people who are called into the redemption business. The problem is that so many Christians believe that somehow being a witness is a specialised role and out of their ability. We realised last week that the harvest God wants us to have a passion for is of the Holy Spirit who does the converting. We are the witnesses and being a witness is not a big deal. It is about praying, living Christ and giving men and women an answer to the truth that is in us.

But as we look at this passage we find that Paul is not just a man with a passion to serve Christ, and a man with a passion for good news, a passion for the harvest he knew that God was bringing through him; but that he was a man passionate for people and would not stop at anything to bring to them words of life.

Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

Compelled to preach. What compelled him? The best answer Paul gives is in 2 Corinthians 5:

11 Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. 12 We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. 13 If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

It wasn't law that compelled Paul to have a passion for people. It was the love of Christ. Because it was that love that took Him to Calvary and it is that love which has brought us to God and which can bring others too.

What does the love of Christ compel us to do?

Paul was called as an apostle. This passage in 1 Corinthians 9 is part of a defence that Paul was making to demonstrate that as an apostle he has authority to do what he was doing. He was being criticised by some in Corinth that because unlike other Jewish preachers - even Peter - he was not asking or requiring them to support him in his mission (Paul was self supporting from tent making work he did). They thought that

because he did not claim his rights that he was less than Peter (or not even an apostle) because as a Jew he should have expected to be supported by others.

Some people have taken this passage and try to get rules out of it as to how we should do witnessing in a church. It's the weakness that many have to try to get law out of something that isn't law but a Pastor trying to sort out some sticky knots in a mixed up church that questioned even his authority.

So down the ages all sorts of ideas have come up that have split the church. Some believe that we should communicate the message as faith missions, other believe that we see this as a model for always ensuring that the gospel is always free. These are good things in many circumstances. Some people use it to suggest that it is justification for not paying Christian workers and supporting only bivocational ministry as Paul had another job as he ministered. Lots of churches rely on this kind of ministry.

But all of these are red herrings. Paul does not have any criticism for Peter - and states that a workman was worthy of his hire. It's just that Paul's way was another way. So just as there are people like Paul around, bivocational ministers, faith missions and plenty of free activities, we see that there is a world out there of paid Christian workers who do effective work in bringing people to Christ and even events where people come to Christ where they've paid money to go to it - concerts, films, festivals, the Cinema - even buying a Bible! I remember in the Brethren many years ago that some criticised the Christian Colportage Association (it was an organisation that sent evangelists around the doors selling Christian books) because they sold books and didn't give them away. The gospel they said should be free so why make people pay for books. More on this in a minute.

What we should draw out of this passage isn't law which is sterile and divisive but we should understand Paul's heart for people and emulate that. In doing so we won't be finding law, but a heart for reaching people who God loves whatever the cost.

So what do we learn from Paul?

👉 We place no obstacles in the way of sharing the good news

16 Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. 19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

Paul was called as an apostle and he could have claimed his rights in preaching - to be supported by the church. That was the Jewish expectation. Paul chose a different lifestyle. Paul's aim was to share the good news, to bring people to Christ and not allow anything else to stand in the way of that. Being a supported Jewish preacher would have marked him out in a certain way. Being free means he could communicate with anybody anywhere without being identified with anybody in particular. I think that's the source of *though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible*. As a Jewish paid preacher he would have been identified with those who supported him and as we shall see in a moment, that would have cut him out of targeting the Gentiles. Claiming his right was an obstacle to his reaching people. But by being free he could make himself a *slave to everyone* and that give him his freedom and ability to move in Jewish and gentile circles and reach people effectively in both.

What obstacles do we put in the way of our reaching people for Christ?

- ☞ Prejudice
- ☞ Denominationalism
- ☞ The Church
- ☞ Reluctance to change

Paul removed an obstacle which allowed him to be inclusive in whom he was able to reach?

William Sloan Coffin once said, "The church is full of people who are seeking that which they have already found and only want to become that which they already are. And that's one of the greatest problems we have in the church."

What obstacle is God asking us to remove?

👤 We become prepared to surrender our prejudices communicate in a way people understand.

20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.

21 To those not having the law I became 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.

22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Many people find these verses remarkable. Here was a man that was prepared to effectively change the way he behaved so to ingratiate himself to people. He says it quite explicitly *I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some*. Isn't that a bit dishonest. What about respect for their culture? What about respect for their culture and customs? To the Jews Paul was happy to circumcise Timothy to give him credibility with Jews. He was happy to go through the necessary purifications to worship in the Temple and claim to be a Pharisee. Just a minute, wasn't he the one who said it wasn't necessary to be Jewish to be a Christian? He says himself here *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law*. Why did he do these things? To be *all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some*. I'm sure some would say that this was a travesty of the Jewish law - he was going through rituals that no longer had meaning for him. But what it did do was give him a door through which he could share the good news with Jews because he was prepared to recognise their customs - although they weren't very happy when they found out that he didn't take them seriously at any other time.

He did the same with the Gentiles. He knew their language and culture. He knew all about their gods and their systems of worship. He read their poetry. He knew how to converse with philosophers. He used his Roman citizenship to get him out of trouble. Just a minute? It's the same as the Jewish situation. He knew all about their laws and customs and use them to great effect in places like Athens, Ephesus, before King Agrippa and in Rome before Caesar. He even changed his name to increase his cred to Gentiles.

Some people find this difficult to cope with. Here was a man who could dance to different tunes purely for the purposes of communicating Christ. Didn't he have any principles? The answer to this is that for the sake of winning people for Christ, he had almost none. He was no respecter of the culture and customs of the people he worked with and used them as tools to reach the people. There were only two principles that Paul actually had and they didn't change whatever culture he moved in:

- 1.** People needed to be brought Christ at all costs
- 2.** Wherever he was, he was under the law of Christ

Paul wasn't antinomian. He didn't act outside of the mind and will of God. He just operated outside the customs of man and used those customs as tools to bring Christ to men. (*though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law*) So what was the law he was under? The law of Christ is a bit of a mystery here. We know he (and we) are not under the Jewish law but we are not free from God's law but under Christ's law. What is Christ's law?

If you remember a long while back we did the passage in Romans 8 on there being no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

When we became citizens of heaven we passed from one jurisdiction to another. Jesus fulfilled the righteous requirements of the old law so we're not under that. We are under a new law. What is its content? Perhaps it's best to use the words of Jesus Himself because this best sums up what the law of Christ is:

Matt 22:37 Jesus replied: " Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: " Love your neighbour as yourself." 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The Jews call these the two words and because the OT - the law and the prophets hang on these two then everything else does too. In other words our actions should be controlled by love for God and love for others. That allowed Paul the freedom to operate outside of Jewish law because he was a citizen of heaven and under a different law. That justified his being all things to all men and using their own customs as ammunition to present the gospel.

What has this got to do with us? Unfortunately, one of the inheritances of the past we have brought with us to the present is a "Christian" culture whether it be a denominational one or an evangelical one. It worked fine 100 years ago and possibly even 30 years ago. We worked within this culture and people came to Christ and everybody understood it. Unfortunately no-one does any more. Stuart Murray tells of a teenage boy who heard the Christmas story for the first time at school. What he just could not understand was why Mary and Joseph would name their child after a swear word. We are in a world that no longer respects our customs or understands our language.

Where this passage is important is we need to separate the good news and the law of Christ from our own laws and customs. You'd be staggered where most of our customs as good Baptist, Protestant, Evangelical Christians actually come from. I'll give you a clue: not from the Bible! To many of our churches are run by prejudice rather than by truth!

Do we want to reach people for Christ. Then we should make the good news our central plank and do whatever necessary so that by all means we should save some, to maintain the law of Christ - but be prepared to jettison everything else that obstructs the work of God - however much of a sacred cow it might seem - because it isn't as important as people. If we have a passion for Christ and a passion for people: it won't be hard to get rid of the obstructions; however Christian they are. Then we need to look at the customs of this world and see how we can use them to bring the gospel to them. Sometimes we can, sometimes we can't

President Calvin Coolidge once invited friends from his hometown to dine at the White House. Worried about their table manners, the guests decided to do everything that Coolidge did. This strategy succeeded, until coffee was served. The president poured his coffee into the saucer. The guests did the same. Coolidge added sugar and cream. His guests did, too. Then Coolidge bent over and put his saucer on the floor for the cat.

**What obstructs people coming to Christ in this Church? In my life?
What do I/we need to repent of and remove to reach people for Christ?**

🏆 The prize outweighs the pain

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. 27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

At 7 P.M. on October 20, 1968, a few thousand spectators remained in the Mexico City Olympic Stadium. It was cool and dark. The last of the marathon runners, each exhausted, were being carried off to first-aid stations. More than an hour earlier, Mamo Wolde of Ethiopia - looking as fresh as when he started the race - crossed the finish line, the winner of the 26 mile, 385 yard event.

As the remaining spectators prepared to leave, those sitting near the marathon gates suddenly heard the sound of sirens and police whistles. All eyes turned to the gate. A lone figure wearing the colours of Tanzania entered the stadium. His name was John Stephen Akhwari. He was the last man to finish the marathon. His leg bloodied and bandaged, severely injured in a fall, he grimaced with each step. He hobbled around the 400-meter track.

The spectators rose and applauded him as if he were the winner. After crossing the finish line, Akhwari slowly walked off the field without turning to the cheering crowd.

In view of his injury and having no chance of winning a medal, someone asked him why he had not quit. He replied, "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it."

Paul finishes with an analogy he uses often. He compares our mission in this world with a race. To the athlete, winning the race is the most important thing. He or she has a passion for it. They have to train every day, they have to watch their diet, they have to be disciplined. Why? Because coming second is not an option - they have to win and only a passion for winning can make them successful. How much of a passion do we have to win the race? How much of a passion do we have for the prize which is an eternal one. Is our passion for seeing lost people won for Christ enough to make us be as desperate as Paul to want to see them saved?

Is it desperate enough for us to change our lifestyle to reach them. Is it enough for us to abandon those customs and prejudices we have in our church to reach them.

One preacher put it all this way:

**"Lack of interest in mission is not fundamentally caused by an absence of compassion or commitment, nor by lack of information or exhortation. And lack of interest in mission is not remedied by more shocking statistics, more gruesome stories or more emotionally manipulative commands to obedience. It is best remedied by intensifying people' s passion for Christ, so that the passions of his heart become the passions that propel our hearts."
(Tim Dearborn, "Beyond Duty" (World Vision, 1997) p.4)**

Let's look at Christ, look at lost people and ask God for that passion that will make us reach them here in Swaffham and beyond by all means.