

# KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE GOAL

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1 Corinthians 9:19-27

## Introduction:

**A Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none.**

**A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all.**

I shared those statements with you a few weeks ago. They were penned by Martin Luther in 1520. But the concept behind those words can be traced back many centuries before that to the Apostle Paul. In our text this morning Paul said, “...*though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all...*”

In the previous couple of messages, we have been looking at chapters 8-9 where Paul has broached the subject of the Christian’s liberty, and how we practice that liberty, and then his own apostolic rights and freedoms. Before we delve into today’s passage, I think it is important that we review a little bit.

In chapter 8 Paul dealt with the issue of Christian liberty and the question of whether it is right or appropriate for a believer to participate in certain activities. For the believers in Corinth, the underlying issue was meat that had been offered to an idol or dedicated at a pagan temple. For us today, the issue might be certain types of entertainment, or the question of tattoos or body piercings.

Paul’s pointed out that, even though we know that an idol is nothing and that meat that has been offered to an idol is not defiled, yet in certain situations, and with certain people whose conscience is weaker, others can be led astray. A weaker believer, seeing you participating in these things, can be led to violate what his conscience says is wrong and so be led to stumble in his walk with God.

So, his conclusion was that he would willingly limit his liberty as a Christian so as not to cause a brother or sister to stumble. In fact, he states that to use our freedom as a Christian in a way that leads others astray is to sin against our brothers and ultimately against Christ – *read vv. 11-12*. So, his commitment is – *v. 13*.

Then in chapter 9, Paul uses himself and Barnabas as an example of giving up his right as an apostle for the sake of the gospel. In the first part of the chapter he defends his right to be supported by those who are benefitting from his ministry. He has the right to eat and drink as his conscience allows. He has the right to have a wife by his side in the ministry. All of these things are available to him as an apostle and a minister of the gospel.

But in v. 15 he says, I have not claimed any of those rights, nor am I writing to try to get something out of you. His only goal is to preach the gospel without placing any obstacle in the way of his hearers. He is willing to forgo any rights or freedoms, so that no one will have an excuse to reject Jesus Christ because of his behaviour or expectations.

Now we have come to the last few verses of this chapter. In this section Paul brings this discussion of his rights and freedoms to a conclusion. In the ESV, as well as the NIV, our text is divided into 2 paragraphs. We are going to use that division to define our outline for our study of this passage this morning. In vv. 19-23 we see Paul’s summary regarding his rights and freedoms. In vv. 24-27 he gives his conclusion by way of an illustration and final statement.

In these words of summary, I believe we have a challenge for ourselves. The real question that we are confronted with as we examine this text is this: **\*\* What is it that is going to determine our behaviour and our expectations as we live out our lives as believers and servants of Jesus Christ? \*\*** Let’s begin with Paul’s summary statements in vv. 19-23:

## Free from All, Yet Servant to All

*Read v. 19 – “free from all...”* – one who is not a slave, set free from slavery, not bound by an obligation. Paul’s argument here is that he is not bound by or to anyone—he is free from all. Yet, he says, “...***I have made myself a servant to all.***” He has voluntarily bound himself to those he is seeking to reach with the gospel of Jesus. Why? In order to win more people for Christ. The primary focus of his life is to see people respond in faith to the gospel.

In vv. 20-23 he expands or explains what he means – *read vv. 20-23*.

Paul gives us some particular examples of areas where he made himself servant to those he was seeking to reach. To the Jew and those under the law (the Law of Moses), he became a Jew. Even though he considered the Law to be fulfilled in Christ, and not binding on him as a believer in Jesus, he willingly submitted to it where he could, so as not to offend the Jews.

To those without the law—the Gentiles—he did not bring compliance to the Law into his daily life, seeking to impose it on those who did not know the Law. He makes it clear that he is not promoting lawlessness, as he places himself under the standards and expectations of Christ himself.

To the weak, he became as weak. He did not look down on others, but placed himself on their level, not isolating or separating himself from them, seeking only to see them respond to the gospel.

So, what is Paul suggesting here? How do we understand this for ourselves today? When it comes to evangelism and reaching people for Christ, I have heard people say, “You need to be like the world if you are going to reach the world.” Is that what Paul is saying? I want to challenge the suggestion that we need to live like the world in order to reach people with the gospel.

When Paul says that he became as one under the Law, or to those outside the Law he became as one outside the Law, he is certainly not suggesting that he would do anything to dishonor Christ or to violate God’s standards. Yet within that scope he was willing to restrict his freedom in order not to offend those he was trying to reach. I thought Matthew Henry, in his commentary put it well. Regarding Paul’s conduct among the Jews, he says,

*“Though he looked on the ceremonial law as a yoke taken off by Christ, yet in many instances he submitted to it, that he might work upon the Jews, remove their prejudices, prevail with them to hear the gospel, and win them over to Christ.”*

And, regarding Paul’s conduct among the Gentiles, he says,

*“...he behaved among them as one that was not under the bondage of the Jewish laws, as he had asserted and maintained*

*concerning them, though he did not act as a lawless person, but as one who was bound by the laws of Christ. He would transgress no laws of Christ to please or humour any man; but he would accommodate himself to all men, where he might do it lawfully, to gain some.”*

And so, we ought to be careful that our conduct and attitudes not offend those to whom we are bringing the gospel. Example – you are reaching out to some Jewish friends. They invite you to join them at a restaurant for a meal. You would not want to order a pulled pork sandwich, even though you love it and have every right to have one.

Paul’s motivation in this, and what ought to be our motivation is found in v. 23 – *read it*. To quote Matthew Henry one more time,

*“...that is, for the honour of Christ, whose the gospel is, and for the salvation of souls, for which it was designed, and that he and they might communicate in the privileges of it, or partake together of them. For these ends did he thus condescend, deny himself as to his liberty, and accommodate himself to the capacities and usages of those with whom he had to do, where he lawfully might.”*

## Running to Win

The final section in this chapter seems at first glance to be rather unrelated to the rest of the chapter. It seems like a new subject, but I believe that it really is Paul’s conclusion to this whole discussion about his rights and freedoms as a Christian and an apostle. He turns to an example—an illustration—that would be very familiar to the Corinthian believers to point out the importance of not losing sight of the big picture, the goal, the purpose for everything that you do in life. I have called this point, running to win.

Let’s read these verses – vv. 24-27. The Greeks were famous for the games and athletic competitions of the ancient Olympics. The Olympiad was really a religious ceremony in honor of the Greek god, Zeus, but it had come to include a variety of competitive races and events. So, the people of Corinth would have readily recognized the point Paul was making in these verses.

Paul begins by pointing out, in v. 24, the obvious fact that in a race there is one prizewinner. You do not win by slacking off, wandering off the race course or quitting part way through the race. If you are going to win the race, you have to give it everything, and persevere to the end. It takes complete commitment – self control in all things.

Here is where our race as Christians diverges from the example Paul is using. In the competitions the Corinthians would be familiar with, there could only be one winner, and they were competing for a perishable wreath – a garland of pine boughs or other green leaves and branches. It would soon die and disintegrate.

But, Paul says, we are running to win a crown that is imperishable. Later on, as Paul approached the end of his life, he wrote these words to Timothy, his beloved son in the faith:

*“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:7-8 ESV)*

Because of the prize at the end, Paul was determined to live his life in such a way that he would not be disqualified from receiving that prize. *Read vv. 26-27 again...* two illustrations: running and boxing. Not running aimlessly, not shadowboxing...

Paul was determined that nothing in his life would negate or render worthless the message he preached. That is why he was willing to surrender his rights, to limit his freedom, so that the things he did would not cancel out or diminish the message he preached.

## **Conclusion**

Early in this message I introduced the question, *“What is it that is going to determine our behaviour and our expectations as we live out our lives as believers and servants of Jesus Christ?”*

We have seen Paul’s answer to that question. Now it is time for us to consider how we will respond. Will we keep our eye on the prize and run to win the crown that God promises to the faithful?