

Title: When in Rome, Do as...Jesus!
Text: 1 Corinthians 9.19-23
Theme: Being careful with preferences
Series: 1 Corinthians #36
Prop Stmt.

From the Word of God, we learn about the gospel of Jesus Christ. His gospel is the message upon which our church, and our lives are established. His gospel understood and embraced is the only way that we can be rightly related to Him. But, this gospel which changes our relationship with God vertically, also affects how we treat each other horizontally. In fact, throughout the first letter from the apostle John, he writes like a jack hammer as he pounds this truth into our lives. You cannot claim to have a valid relationship to God, unless your relationship with others is reflecting it.

When you come to faith in Christ, you are at once – free.
When you come to faith in Christ, you are at once – a slave.
If you do not come to faith in Christ, you are free.
If you do not come to faith in Christ, you are a slave.

Power-point slide

This really is a radical concept. For the follower of Christ, freedom is a powerful truth that fundamentally changes the way that I look at my life and the way that I view others. Freedom means in part; the ability to place myself under the needs of others. Freedom is the ability to live without being controlled by that which does not ultimately matter. This really is an example of the give up to gain principle. Now, hold that thought for a minute.

We all deal with issues of freedom and bondage. Some of you think that you are a slave to your work. My job owns me. It is sort of like the guy who was laying in bed one morning while his wife was telling him to get up in order to go to church. He said, “the pastor is lousy, his sermons are boring and long...give me one good reason I should go get up and go to church. She said, “Because you are the pastor.” What is the difference between a pastor who says, “Man this stinks, I have to be in church every Sunday” or the pastor who says, “I love this! I get to help influence my people for the glory of God through the ministry of the Word!” What is the difference between the person who goes to work because he or she has to, and the person who says, “this is my job, I chose to be here, I chose to provide for my family, I chose to be a good employee, I chose to be a reflection of Christ! The difference between the two is infinite.

This text is one of those passages that seems to leap off of the page and grab you by the throat and won't let you go. I have heard this passage used over and over to explain how we should use different means to help reach people with the gospel. In other words, find out what works for the Jews and do it that way. Find out what works for others, the rich, the poor, the white-collar, the blue-collar, the urban, the suburban, the rural, figure out what pushes their buttons, and then do it so that you can win them for the gospel. Ok, I am willing to grant that this could in a limited way be a secondary or tertiary application

of the main idea but I think you will see, THAT is not the main idea. What is the main idea? Let's take a closer look.

When you read this passage, you can clearly see what is going on. Paul gives the big idea in v.19 and then spends the next three verses explaining it, and finally in v.23, he gives the final thought that he then illustrates in the conclusion of the chapter.

Let's break this down. V.19 tells us three things. It tells us 1) what he was, 2) what he did and 3) why he did it.

- 1) What was he? He was free and he belonged to no man.

That statement would really resonate with this audience. In fact, in the original language, Paul begins this sentence with the word "Free." You could translate this phrase – "Free is what I am!" This is done deliberately in an attempt to set up this huge contrast with what he is about to say. This statement connects with us, but it really connected with his original audience since The Roman Empire was ruled and functioned practically on the backs of an expansive system of slavery. Those who were slaves (by some accounts two-thirds of the empire's population) obviously, for the most part desired to be free. (and) Those who were free had no desire to be slaves. Paul was free. Paul belonged to no man. He met plenty of people who could not say that.

- 2) What did Paul do with that freedom? He did the unthinkable. He freely chose to make himself a slave to others.

Have you ever gone through a late-night drive thru – really late at night? Granted, I have somewhat of a limited experience with this, but what I have observed is that the people who work the late night drive thru's are generally not the happiest people in the world. They are there because for whatever reason – they have to be there. And the manager, who is there, is there because for whatever reason – he/she has to be there. Now, let's say that the guy running the window inherits 10 million dollars from an uncle. He finds out that if puts this into Certificates of Deposit paying 6% that he could have as an annual salary \$600,000. He figures that being 19 years old and single that he could live on that. Now, let's say that the next night he shows up for his shift at Taco Bell. And you, knowing all this are working with him. "Dude...What are you doing here? You don't have to be here. You can go home and count your money." And he says, "I want to be here. I consider my friendship with you and the opportunity to work with people to be more important than my leisure and convenience." Do you think that his decision to be there, even if he doesn't have to, will have any affect on his attitude?

- 3) Why did Paul choose to be a slave to others? In order to win as many as possible. Later in v.23 he repeats this big idea again and adds the phrase, "that I may share in its blessing."

Now, look at verses 20-22. They all follow a similar pattern. Paul is simply giving examples of the main idea, by repeating what he does with his freedom and why he does it. Look at the structure.

| | <u>Audience</u> | <u>Action</u> | <u>Purpose</u> |
|------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| v.20 | To the Jews | I became like a Jew | to win the Jews |
| | To those under the law | I became ...under the law | to win...under the law |
| v.21 | To those not having...law | I became not...having law | to win...them |
| v.22 | To the weak | I became weak | to win the weak |
| | To all men | I became all things | to save some |

Jerry is going to write a book someday called, “Abusing ourselves to death” bringing clarity and sanity to the most misunderstood and twisted popular passages of the Bible. This one would probably be chapter 3 right behind, “judge not that ye be not judged” and “where two or three gather.” I think you can see now, why when Paul says in v.22, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.” He is not saying that he does drugs in order to meet druggies to bring them to Christ. Nor is he hanging out at strip clubs, or casinos in order to reach people who need the gospel. That is not the point. The point is...are you ready?

1. **Ministering to people is more important than exercising my rights.** (19)

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible.

Paul raised the question at the beginning of this chapter. Am I not free? Yes! I most certainly am free, but that does not mean that I have to exercise that freedom. Paul is free to get married if he wants. Paul is free to eat and drink what he wants. Paul is free to be compensated for his work if he wants. But, Paul does not walk into a situation looking out for number 1. He sets aside his rights. He can orate with the most elite of the city, but the fact that he sat in a shop and made tents gave him inroads to others. He was willing to set aside what he could rightfully expect in order to have open doors of ministry. We have different socio-economic classes in the church, but our differences are not nearly as extreme as the ones in Corinth. Paul was from the upper crust, and he put on display what he said in Eph 5.21 – “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

So, let’s get personal. What should you be doing about this? Is there a relationship that you have with someone in the church that is strained? What has been your attitude in the matter? In your personal quest for justice, or for the person to see it your way, have you trampled on the relationship? Have you pursued your rightness at the expense of having a ministry with that person? You have rights and you have opinions and you have the right to your opinion. But, the fact that you have the right to your opinion does not mean that you always have to say it out loud.

Remember that Paul is not dealing with matters where there has been clear wrong-doing. In that case, the steps of Matthew 18, illustrated in 1 Cor. 5 are the pattern. But here, he

is talking about debatable issues. Here is the governing principle. Ministering to people is more important than exercising my rights. In fact...

2. **Ministering to all people is more important than exercising my rights.** (20-22)

Paul makes it clear that he values his relationship with all of the people, and all of the groups in the church.

a. Reaching Jews

Is Paul free to eat barbeque pork sandwiches? Sure, he is. But if he as an ethnic Jew, would express his freedom by eating non-kosher foods with other Jewish people, would that be a distraction or a problem? Absolutely. Paul understands that it is more important for him to have a ministry with those people than to eat barbeque pork.

Now please do not miss this. This is where people often want to make a rule. They want to say that therefore, eating a certain food is wrong. No, it isn't wrong. But in that situation it is wrong. There is a legitimate place for some situational ethics. Is Paul being inconsistent if he won't eat barbeque pork with some, but he will with others? No, in reality he is being consistent. He is being consistent not to a surface rule, but to a deeper principle. That is the principle of ministry. Ministering to all people is more important than exercising my rights.

b. Reaching those under the law

While the audience of these two groups has a great deal of overlap, Paul is giving a bit more explanation of the main point here in the last part of v.20. He makes it clear in the parenthetical comment that he is not under the law. He does not have to follow the dietary or other commands that governed some of the Jewish social life. But, when he is with people who are living under the law, he does not fight it.

c. Reaching the weak

This last group basically summarizes the whole point. Notice that in these three groups, it is always the person with the freedom or the person with the strength who is setting it aside for the sake of ministry. It is the person with the knowledge that does not flaunt the knowledge or belittle the others, but sets that aside for the sake of ministry.

For example: In some Baptist churches in Russia, they have a tradition that has functionally become a law that when a person is baptized, that person has to wear all white. We know that wearing white is never commanded in the Scripture. A person can wear white, black, brown, t-shirt and jeans, suit, bathing suit, whatever. Modesty is obviously an issue, but there is no command to wear white. If you were invited to go and teach, and as a courtesy you were asked to help in a baptismal service would it be wise to tell the people prior to the baptismal service that the custom of wearing white is silly, legalistic and biblically indefensible? No. Even though you may be making a legitimate point, it really is not a hill to die on. And if they ask you to wear white – you do it.

3. **There are more blessings in reaching people than in exercising my rights.**
(23)

When these sorts of discussions come up, we tend to focus on what a person has to give up. Paul, how did you do that? How did you live that way? How could you live so simply or place yourself back under the law, or go along with all of those traditions? How could you give up so much? When you recognize that the blessings you gain in reaching and ministering to people are more important than exercising your rights, you will begin to discover some of the real joys of the Christian life.

In November, I usually preach a series of sermons on this principle entitled, give up to gain. In this context, Paul is dealing with giving up the exercise of his rights in order to have a ministry. The truth is, we are called to do this as a way of life. People with limited sight, only look at the give up part. They are seeing life through the diabolical lens that filters out the true glory of God and seeks to distort reality into a pursuit of comfort, all for me. People with the eyes of Jesus, see beyond the giving up to the gain that will be realized. In the last few years, we have been given a front row seat to watch how one family has lived according to this principle.

Steve Merry had a thriving practice as a medical doctor. He made a very comfortable salary and did not need financial assistance from others. He and his wife Kayleen chose to set that aside in order to go serve as Missionaries in the country of the Ivory Coast on the African continent. In order to serve as a medical missionary who could also be of real help to the churches, Steve pursued and received a seminary degree in theology. He also gave up many weekends at home in order to present their potential ministry to churches as he asked for financial assistance. It was during one of those weekends that Steve and Kayleen visited here, and our hearts were woven together. They became part of our missionary family. Steve and Kayleen were willing to give up a certain lifestyle for another because they understood the greater gain. During this time, they had one child, and were desirous of more, but were unable to have more children. They decided to adopt two children from Eastern Europe. They were willing to give up a certain lifestyle because they understood the greater gain. Some of you can identify with the challenges of that process, which they completed, only to find out the Kaylene had become pregnant, with twins. They took it in stride, giving up more personal space, more conveniences, more sanity in order to adjust to a family of seven from a family of three in less than a year. Still, they were heading for the Ivory Coast. Upon their arrival, Steve's work in the hospital there was immediately put to great use. But, after getting settled down, the country imploded in civil war. Steve and Kayleen and the kids found themselves huddled in the shower of the home, since it provided the best defense as bullets whizzed through other rooms. The harrowing story of their escape was reprinted in a magazine article as only Steve could tell it. They resettled for a time being in a neighboring country and eventually came back to the states to figure out their next move. In all of their correspondence, there was no bitterness, no whining or complaining. They knew that obedience to God was no guarantee of smooth circumstantial sailing. Their hearts remained tender to the needs in Africa and they longed to go back. Meanwhile, Kayleen

had some medical problems. She had leukemia. In an amazing story of God's providence, Steve was hired on staff at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Part of his job responsibilities would include training cross-cultural medical teams for Africa. This allowed him to work in order to pay for the health care that Kayleen would need, and she would also receive top level care. Kayleen appeared to have beaten the disease, and the family was finally seeking to adjust when in November (2005) she relapsed. Through these weeks of treatments, surgery, bone-marrow transplant and isolation, Steven and Kayleen and their children have been called upon to give up again. Steve is giving up his wife to this life and their dreams of raising their family together and serving together in Africa. Kayleen is giving up her desire to raise her children and be with her husband. The children are now called to give up their mother. What is the gain in that? It is natural for us to live with the expectation, or the sense of rights to this life. But in so doing, we miss out on the gain of resting all of my cares, all of my life in the Sovereign and tender, and what appears at times to me to be the unsafe hands of God. If we do not give up what we consider our rights to a life of ease, we miss out on living with a personal encounter with the grace of God. You want apparent safety and security – live for yourself. Go find your life, but realize that when you do, it is certain that you will lose it. You want an adventure, give up. Lose your life in Christ, and then you will find it. Sound crazy? I close with a portion of the last letter received from Steve telling us of Kaylene's imminent death and you answer that question.

“Today, we admitted that things look less hopeful than they have, but that God is sovereign. As the ICU team readied the ventilator and supplies and prepared to intubate her we spoke to her again about her win-win situation. She either goes home to be with the Lord which is far better for her; or she gets to stay on earth and raise the children and enjoy our continued friendship. She nodded understanding of this can't-go-wrong future. I then read her the benediction from Jude – To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen – and again pleaded with her to maintain hope that her lungs will improve.

Later Steve was with the kids. “We talked about the significance of Kayleen's life, about what she told them at the time of the relapse in November, that God is both omnipotent and good, that her leukemia is part of a mysterious but beautiful tapestry that will only reveal itself in time, perhaps only in heaven. We talked of the hope of their unlived lives, of all of the talents with which God has blessed them, of how Kayleen would never want them to dwell on the morbid, but live in the Hope of the resurrection, continuing as powerful witnesses of His sufficient grace in the midst of agonizing loss.”

He closes the letter with the words of a hymn we love to sing around here. He said that it summarizes the struggles and the joys of this moment. He asks us to belt it out, Don't hold back because it's truth is radical, a message incomprehensible to those who have not YET fallen prostrate before the cross of Christ in agonizing guilt and been lifted by the nail-scarred loving hand of the Savior to new life in him. On Christ the solid rock!