

22. Learning to Minister to People Where They Are

In our last topic, we saw that Paul had chosen to do what he did in his ministry at Corinth to be an example to the new Christians. In the same way, we want to show our physical and spiritual children how to be an example to others so that others will learn to follow the Lord from their example. As we learn to be an example to people, we have the opportunity to minister to people in many different situations. In our topic today, we are going to see that Paul gives all of us an example of the importance of learning to minister to people by learning to understand the background of each person so that we can effectively minister to people where they are at in their lives.

We have seen that Paul was free from obligation to anyone because he never asked for financial support. However, we see that Paul used this freedom to serve others in love. 1 Corinthians 9:19 says, “For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more.” Although Paul was free from obligation to any person because he had not asked for financial support, Paul chose to make himself a servant to all. The word that is translated “made myself a servant” is the word that speaks of a person that has become a slave to someone else. It comes from the word for bondservant, which spoke of a person that was a slave.

Paul often referred to himself as a bondservant of Jesus Christ. Romans 1:1 is one example when it says, “Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God.” Paul had chosen to be a bondservant of Jesus Christ. Here, we see that Paul also says he had chosen to be a bondservant to all people. Then, he goes on to give the reason why he had made this choice within himself. Paul had made the choice to make himself a bondservant to all so that he could win more people to Christ. Here, we see an example for our own lives. If we choose to become a bondservant to all so that we can win more people to Christ, we will provide an example for our physical and spiritual children to follow.

Paul goes on to explain what it means to be a bondservant to all by mentioning several different groups. 1 Corinthians 9:20-23 says, “And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law; to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with *you*.” For Paul to become a bondservant meant that he learned what he had to do and say to effectively communicate the Gospel to each particular group of people.

First, we see that Paul became a Jew so that he would have the opportunity to win Jews to Christ. The Jews tried to follow the Old Testament law. As a result, Paul was willing to live according to the law for the sake of reaching the Jews for Christ, even though he recognized that he was no longer under the law. Acts 21:23-24 says, “Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning

you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.” In the last part of these verses, we see that Paul walked in an orderly fashion and was obedient to the law. In the first part of these verses, he was asked to take a Jewish vow. Verse 26 shows that Paul honored this request when it says, “Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.” Paul was willing to take a Jewish vow to reach other Jews for Christ.

Secondly, we see that Paul did whatever was necessary to reach the Gentiles that did not have the Jewish law. We read in Acts 17:22-23, “Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.’” Paul took time to observe the customs of the people of Athens so that he could communicate effectively with them. Because he took that time, he was able to use that as a starting point from which to begin his message at creation and end it with the death and resurrection of Christ.

When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he reminded them that he had taught them that Christ had set them free and as Gentiles they were not under the Jewish law. Galatians 5:1 says, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” At the same time, he taught them how to use that liberty to serve one another. Galatians 5:13 says, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Paul never taught the Gentiles that they had to obey the Jewish law.

Thirdly, Paul also became weak so that he could gain the weak. The word “weak” speaks of those who are sick, feeble or without strength. In 2 Corinthians 10:10, we read, “‘For *his* letters,’ they say, ‘*are* weighty and powerful, but *his* bodily presence *is* weak, and *his* speech contemptible.’” Then, in 2 Corinthians chapter eleven, Paul told some of the physical problems that he experienced in order to bring the Gospel to others. Paul also reminded the Corinthians that he was willing to become all things to all men so that he could share the Gospel with more people with the goal that some would be saved from their sin. He went to people where they were, worked to understand their point of view and became like them instead of expecting them to come to him. He did this for the sake of the Gospel. In the same way, we want to show our children by our example that we are willing to make whatever sacrifices of our own desires that are necessary in order to reach others for Christ.

Paul also encouraged the Corinthians to follow his example and be willing to make whatever sacrifices they needed to make in order to share the Gospel with others. 1 Corinthians 9:24-25 says, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*. And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for* an imperishable *crown*.” The Greeks had two great sporting events, one was the Olympic Games and the other was the Isthmian Games. The Isthmian games were held in the city of Corinth so the Corinthians fully understood

people running in races.

Paul said that in a physical race only one person can win the prize. However, to win the prize the person must compete according to the rules of the race. In addition, the runners also spent much time training before they participated in the race. They disciplined their bodies in an effort to win the race and receive the prize. In that day, the prize was not a gold metal. Instead, the prize was a wreath made of leaves that quickly faded. However, the people would train for many months to win that wreath that would only last for a few hours.

In contrast, Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that as Christians we will receive an imperishable crown. Nothing can destroy the crowns that will be given to Christians for faithful service. Here, Paul explains why he was willing to take the time to learn to understand the people to whom he shared the Gospel. He was looking forward to the eternal reward and not just a crown of leaves that would quickly fade away. In the same way, we want to be an example to our children of the importance of living our lives in such a way that the things that we do have eternal value so that we will receive an eternal reward.

Paul then pointed to his own example to encourage the Corinthians to follow his example and learn to become all things to all people for the purpose of seeing some place their faith in Christ. 1 Corinthians 9:26-27 says, “Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.” Here, Paul explained why he had chosen to become a bondsman to all and take the time to understand each person so that they could hear the Gospel in a way that they could understand.

Paul was willing to make the necessary sacrifices in his own life so that he could win the race for the reward that the Lord offers to each one of us who choose to be faithful. Paul said that he did not just shadow box by pretending to hit the air around him. Instead, he made the choices to submit his body to the Lord and discipline his body so that he could effectively reach both Jews and Gentiles for Christ. We saw that he had chosen to walk in an orderly fashion according to the law in order to reach the Jews. He did not expect the Gentiles to even learn or understand the Jewish law because his desire was to reach the Gentiles. Instead, he chose to discipline himself so that he could present the Gospel to them effectively in a way that they could understand. Paul practiced self-discipline in all areas of his life so that he would not be disqualified and not allowed to participate in the work of the Lord. In the same way, we want to show our children by our example the importance of making sure that we do not disqualify ourselves by sin so that they will make it their goal to serve effectively. May the Lord richly bless you as you make sacrifices in your own life to have an effective ministry to others.