

22nd Sunday after Pentecost
October 20, 2024
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Followers of Christ Make Selfless Sacrifices
1 Corinthians 9:7-12, 19-23 (EHV)

What soldier ever serves at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat some of its fruit? Or who takes care of a flock and does not drink milk from the flock? ⁸Am I saying this just from a human point of view? Doesn't the law also say this? ⁹Yes, it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out grain." Is God really concerned about oxen, ¹⁰or does he say this entirely for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher ought to thresh in hope of getting a share. ¹¹If we sowed spiritual seed for your good, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you? ¹²If others have some right to make this claim on you, don't we even more? But we did not use this right. Instead, we endure everything so as not to cause any hindrance for the gospel of Christ...

¹⁹In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more. ²⁰To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those who are under the law. ²¹To those who are without the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God's law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law. ²²To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. ²³And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.

Dear Friends in Christ,

What would you give up to reach an important goal? If you want to get a promotion or a new job, would you give up some time you would normally use for fun and relaxation in order to get the training you need for that job? If you wanted to make the sports team, would you give up time with friends in the evening to train and get up early to lift weights? If you want to make a big purchase in the future, will you give up expensive coffees and restaurant lunches in order to get to your savings goal faster?

The goal set before us today by the Apostle Paul is more important than any job and certainly bigger than making a sports team. The goal is to save people from sin and eternal death. Of course, we can't actually save anyone. The Son of God was born to save sinners. Christ himself lived in the place of sinners. Christ died in the place of sinners and in this way rescued people from sin, death and the devil. Jesus is the Savior of all. But we, his people, are the instruments he uses to bring the gospel to many so that many may be gained for the kingdom of God. Followers of Christ Make Selfless Sacrifices in pursuit of such a noble goal.

Paul begins with an interesting example.

What soldier ever serves at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat some of its fruit? Or who takes care of a flock and does not drink milk from the flock? ⁸Am I saying this just from a human point of view? Doesn't the law also say this? ⁹Yes, it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out grain." Is God really concerned about oxen, ¹⁰or does he say this entirely for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher ought to thresh in hope of getting a share. ¹¹If we sowed spiritual seed for your good, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you? ¹²If others have some right to make this claim on you, don't we even more? But we did not use this right. Instead, we endure everything so as not to cause any hindrance for the gospel of Christ...

Paul encourages believers to give earthly support, daily bread to those who bring the Bread of Life to them. This congregation has supported its pastors with a salary/daily bread in the past, continues to do so in the present, and will with whoever serves as pastor in the future. This is not something we struggle with today. Giving the pastor a salary very rarely causes any hinderance for the gospel of Christ among us now. But it was a bit of a newer concept for the first Christians, especially the Gentiles. So, Paul would not ask for or demand what was owed to a minister of the gospel. He did not want any of those who heard the gospel from his lips to think he was trying to get money out of them. Paul was willing to give up money for the sake of the gospel of Christ.

What might be hindering our proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to those around us? Maybe we need to give up a sin. It is contradictory to tell someone that Jesus has forgiven all sins and then continue in a particular sin without remorse. Unbelievers will see the hypocrisy and may not listen to your testimony about Jesus. Or we might need to give up our comfort. It is not always comfortable to turn a conversation about earthly things into a conversation about Jesus and eternal things. We might get challenged, attacked, abandoned, or ridiculed. Are we willing to give up our comfort in order to gain more for the kingdom of God?

Paul goes on to explain what he is willing to do in order to gain many.

¹⁹In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more. ²⁰To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those who are under the law. ²¹To those who are without the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God's law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law. ²²To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some. ²³And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.

Paul is free from all sin through Christ. Paul is looking forward to sharing in the eternal blessings of the gospel, that is, eternal life with his Savior. Paul, who considered himself the worst of sinners, has been saved by the blood of Christ shed for him on the cross. So have you. Your sin has been covered by Christ's sacrifice. Your reluctance to talk about Christ with others has been forgiven. You are going to share in the blessings of the gospel forever with your Savior. In view of God's mercy to Paul and all of us, we selflessly sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the same gospel that saved us.

Paul did this by becoming all things to all people so that he might save some. The Lord had given Paul a unique life in order to become all things to all people at his time. Paul was born as a Jew. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. He was raised to observe the Sabbath Day, to eat kosher, to go to Jerusalem for Passover, to observe the Day of Atonement. Paul was taught by a famous Rabbi named Gamaliel and Paul became a Pharisee. Of all the "denominations" of Judaism, the Pharisees took the Word of God most seriously. Therefore, Paul knew the Old Testament very well and he also knew what it was like to be self-righteous, depending on one's own works to save him. So, Paul could become a Jew to gain Jews and like one under the law to win those under the law. After his conversion to faith in Christ, he still went to the synagogue. He went to the temple in Jerusalem. The Passover and Day of Atonement pointed to Christ so he didn't have to observe these festivals, but he could in order to point his people to the Savior. He didn't have to eat kosher, but he could in order to be around his people and point them to the One who cleanses from sin.

Paul was also uniquely positioned to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. He was a Roman citizen and lived in a Greek culture. He knew what Gentile life was like in the Roman Empire. He could relate to the rulers and to his fellow citizens. He knew about their religious customs, their false gods, and their immoral ways. But he could eat with them even if they served pork chops. He could meet with them in the marketplace and talk about the Son of God who died and rose again.

He did not join in their worship of false gods or their immorality, but he did not avoid the people who needed to hear the gospel. He became like those without the law in order to gain them for the kingdom of God.

And even though Paul was from a higher class in society, as a believer he became weak to win the weak. He was not afraid to be with the common people, with the sick, the disabled, the soldiers, the sailors, the prisoners. He became all things to all people to win some.

We might not have the same division of Jews and Gentiles today, but there are certainly many who know a little about the Bible and many who know almost nothing. There are some who follow the Jewish faith, many who follow Islam and many who claim to have no religion. Can we become like them enough to have a conversation about Jesus? This does not mean joining in sin or false worship. It simply means being around those who don't believe and not acting like you are disgusted by them or that you are somehow better than them. The goal is to win them, not defeat them.

The weak are all around us and are us. Homeless, mental illness, disabilities, poverty, sickness, addiction and more affect those inside and outside the faith. The weak flocked to Jesus because of his compassion for them. How can we be people whom the weak in society are comfortable to be around when others reject them? And then let the gospel win them for Christ's kingdom.

Winning many to faith in Christ is the goal and Paul says, "*I do everything for the sake of the gospel.*" This limits what we will do to become all things to all people. We will never change the gospel. We will not compromise the Word of God. It may be that we could change a few things in God's Word or leave out a few teachings to get more people to join our congregation at Lincoln Heights Lutheran. But filling the pews of this church is not our primary goal. We want what Paul wanted and what God our Savior wants, that all people are saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. We want heaven filled. The only message that brings people to believe in Christ is the gospel that the Son of God took on human flesh, lived perfectly under God's law for all people, died an innocent death to redeem all people, and rose bodily from the grave to overcome death and give eternal life to all people. We are the instruments to bring that saving message to the people in our lives. If the Holy Spirit brings them to faith, we rejoice with the angels in heaven. If some of those people end up worshipping with us in this place, we also rejoice.

We might think Paul had an advantage over us, being Jewish by birth, Roman by citizenship and Greek by culture. But God has also uniquely placed you in this world among people who he wants to save. Maybe you are a white-collar worker or a blue-collar worker, a mom or a dad, a native Iowan or an immigrant from another state or country, a teacher or a student, male or female, a Christian from infancy or a recent convert. You are in a great place to be a witness for Christ. You don't even have to give up much to plant the seed of the gospel because your life intersects with the lives of those who are missing out on the hope, the joy, the forgiveness, the peace, and the eternal life you have through Jesus Christ.

We don't have to be fake about fitting in with others. We don't have to force conversations about Jesus. We certainly don't need to verbally fight those with different beliefs. God will put you in situations in life to learn about and care about a person who does not believe so that you can with sincerity and compassion tell them about your great hope in Christ who has forgiven the sin of the world. God bless us with many such opportunities to become all things to all people in the hope of gaining many for God's kingdom.

Amen.