

**BECOMING ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE: A LIFE OF SLAVERY**

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-23

PASTOR JIMMY SNOWDEN

**INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

This morning we will be tackling one of the most quoted passages in the Bible. How many of you have ever heard someone say, “Lead me to the Rock that is higher than I”? I doubt many of you have. It is a quote from Psalm 62. It is not that it is not a worthy passage to quote. It is just that it has not found a regular place in the phraseology of twenty-first century Christianity. On the other hand, how many of you have ever heard a fellow believer talk about “becoming all things to all people”? This has become part of standard Christian conversation in our generation. I want to tell you before I begin that I will not be dealing with every bit and detail of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 this morning. My focus this morning will be on vs. 22b—“I have become all things to all people.” I want to focus on this passage because I believe that this has become one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. So this morning our entire time will be spent looking at 22b in context. I will attempt to explain what Paul means and what Paul does not mean.

**BECOMING ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE**

So, what ultimately does it mean to become all things to all people and what does this entail? Before getting started I want to tell you that everything that I say will apply to you on two levels: 1. it will apply to you as an individual and 2. it will apply to you as a part of the corporate body. We as individuals and the church at large need to embrace this vision that Paul lays forth. So please keep both emphases in view as we go. I have quite a few things to say to this so I will merely block the ideas off numerically.

1. It is imperative that you understand this statement in light of the context in which it is found. Let me remind you of what Paul has said up to this point. In chapter 8 Paul exhorted the Corinthians to give up their right to eat meat sacrificed to idols for the sake of those who were susceptible to the pull of idolatry. So far in chapter 9 we have seen that Paul has given up his right to compensation for the sake of the forward advancement of the Gospel. The section in which our passage is found is a summary of sorts. The theme of 1 Corinthians 8-9 thus far has been giving up rights for the sake of others. Now consider the passage with me.

<sup>19</sup> Although I am a free man and not anyone’s slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself and not under the law—to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those who are without that law, like one without the law—not being without God’s law but within Christ’s law—to win those without the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to

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all people, so that I may by every possible means save some.<sup>23</sup> Now I do all this because of the gospel, so I may become a partner in its benefits.

Let's take a moment to consider vs. 19. Paul has just exhorted the Corinthians to give up their rights for the sake of their fellow brethren and has just demonstrated how he himself has given up his right to compensation for the sake of the Gospel. Now he says that he has become a slave to everyone. Let me ask you, what does it mean to be a slave? It means that you have no rights! Do you see how this all fits together? He has just been talking about giving up rights for the sake of others and then he says that he has become a slave, one without rights, to everyone. We will get back to verse 19 in a moment. It is essential that you follow the flow of Paul's argument in vss. 19-23. It consists of three steps: 1. in vs. 19 Paul lays down the principle which undergirds his approach to life and ministry ("I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people"), 2. in vss. 20-22a he explains what this looks like ("To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews... To those without that law, like one without the law... to the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak."). 3. In vs. 22b he reiterates the principle which he stated in vs. 19 in different words ("I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some"). Paul became a slave to the Jews in order to win the Jews, he became a slave to those without the law in order to win those without the law, and he became a slave to the weak in order to win the weak. In its most fundamental sense, then, what does it mean to become all things to all people? It means that we, like slaves, give up our rights for the sake of winning some.<sup>2</sup> To become all things to all people ultimately has to do with giving up rights for the sake of winning souls to Christ. Becoming all things to all people in the context equals becoming everyone's slave. That is, the principle which Paul lays forth in vs. 22b is merely another way of stating the principle he laid forth in vs. 19.<sup>3</sup>

Has anyone ever told you that this is what it means to become all things to all people? Has anyone ever told you that becoming all things to all people ultimately means that you are to give up your rights for the sake of winning more people? Isn't it amazing! Whenever people explain what becoming all things to all people means they focus primarily on the Christian's

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<sup>2</sup> Ciampa and Rosner have a helpful explanation of how Paul's statement about becoming a slave to all would have been taken by those living in first century Corinth. "According to the *Institutes* of the Roman jurist Gaius (second century A.D.), the 'principal distinction made by the law of persons is this: that all human beings are either free or slaves.' 'In the ancient Greek and Roman world, the polarity between 'slave' and 'free' seemed as natural a way of dividing up the human race as those between men and women or young and old.' For a person to become a slave was to give up their identity and experience what has been referred to as 'social death.' Essentially 'the slave serves as surrogate body for the slave-holder.'" He explains further, "Paul's self-description also matches that of a slave whose cultural adaptation is part of his job requirements. A slave captured through war and sold to a Roman household will be expected to adapt to the Roman culture of the household. If sold to a Jewish household or a household of another cultural background, he or she will need to adapt to the culture of that new household, to become like them. The slave's cultural adaptability is a reflection of the requirements of his life's situation, but the fact that Paul sees himself having to adjust to whatever cultural context he might minister within (whether Jewish or Gentile) reflects the transcendent identity flowing from his participation in the greater reality (new creation)." Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 421, 425.

<sup>3</sup> Ciampa and Rosner's chiasmic arrangement of vss. 19-22 is quite helpful. *Ibid.*, 423-424. Garland has produced a similar construction. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 427.

responsibility to adapt to their environment. So when Hudson Taylor became a missionary to China, he adapts to Chinese culture by adopting their diet and style of dress. Although this is an entailment of what it means to become all things to all people, it certainly is deficient as it stands on its own. To become all things to all people means to say “GOODBYE” to your rights for the sake of winning souls while at the same time knowing your full freedom in Christ.<sup>4</sup> To become all things to all people means that you assume the role of a slave. Don’t miss this; to become all things to all people is not first and foremost an action, it is a mindset and a heart attitude. It is a mindset that willingly subjects self to the sensibilities of others. Certainly, the practical outworking of becoming all things to all people will include adapting to new environments. But this is hardly what becoming all things to all people is at its root. At its root becoming all things to all people means willingly and voluntarily letting go of rights for the sake of winning more to Christ.

Do you see how much we water all of this down? We focus on the adapting part without focusing on the self-denying principle which leads to a willingness to adapt. It is an easy thing to adjust. Everyone, after all, wants to be culturally ‘with it.’ The easy thing is to get the hip and trendy tattoo—who doesn’t want to get the hip tattoo? What becoming all things to all people for most includes is finding something that you really want that is culturally trendy and then attaching an evangelistic purpose to it. The hard part is to adjust to the culture for the right reasons. The hard thing is to adopt the posture and mindset of a slave. The hard thing is to get the tattoo, not because you want to, but because it is what is necessary to win more people. If all you have done is adjust to the culture, you haven’t become all things to all people. Anyone can simply adjust to the culture. That is the easy thing to do (and yet it is the only thing emphasized). So the goal is not to simply adjust, but to adjust as a slave. You must adjust as one who has forfeited what is rightfully yours for the sake of winning more. So did Hudson Taylor become all things to the Chinese? Well... I can’t tell by looking at his dress and what sort of utensils he ate with (chopsticks or a fork). I can only tell by looking at the disposition of his heart and his motives—that is, does he dress the way he does and eat with the proper utensils as a slave to the Chinese to win the Chinese?

2. We must look to Jesus as the ultimate example of what it means to become all things to all people. Isn’t it amazing that Paul’s sermon in Acts 17 to the Athenians is the most prominent example that Christians point to as a demonstration of what it means to become all things to all people?! As good as Paul’s sermon is (and it is mighty good!), it is not the primary example. If you want to get a perfect example of what it means to become all things to all people consider the attitude of Christ as evidenced in Mark 10:43-45.

<sup>43</sup> But it must not be like that among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave to all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life—a ransom for many.

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<sup>4</sup> Thus Gordon Fee can refer to Paul’s ministry as a “free slavery.” Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 423.

Jesus points to His self-sacrificial death as the example of what it means to become a slave to all. What drove Jesus to do all that He did? Paul tells us that “the Messiah did not seek to please Himself” (Romans 15:3). What drove Jesus? Was He driven by self-consumed desire? No! He was driven by a love for sinners and a desire to please His Father. The Messiah became a slave to all (Philippians 2:5-10). You have to understand that Jesus became all things to all people in a way that we will never have to. It is one thing for an apostle to become weak to win the weak (to become a slave of the weak to the weak), it is quite another thing for the Creator to become one of His own creatures to win (by dying for) His creatures. It is one thing for Hudson Taylor to become a Chinaman to win the Chinese, it is quite another thing for the Holy, Holy, Holy God to take on flesh and dwell among a sinful people and to die in their stead for the sake of saving such sinners. Jesus truly became a slave to all. He became a human to win humans. If you do not ultimately learn from Christ what it means to become all things to all people you haven’t even begun to understand what it is about.

3. Let me give you just one biblical example of someone who became all things to all people. Turn with me to Acts 16:1-3.

<sup>1</sup> Then he went on to Derbe and Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek. <sup>2</sup> The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him. <sup>3</sup> Paul wanted Timothy to go with him, so he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, since they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Here we see that Paul truly did live by the principle, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.” Paul wanted to take Timothy with Him as a co-missionary. The Spirit had set Timothy apart and validated his ministry through the affirmation of the local church (vs. 2). However, Paul was hesitant to take Timothy with him without first getting him circumcised in fear of how the Jews might respond to the preaching of an uncircumcised fellow. I want you to consider a few things about this passage in light of 1 Corinthians 9. First, you have to remember that this all took place in the days before modern medicine. Excedrin, Ibuprofen, Tylenol, Baby Aspirin, and not even Flintstone Vitamins were invented yet, let alone morphine! Circumcision is a medical procedure that includes the removal of a hunk of flesh from the body. This is not something that you just decide to do as you are relaxing by the pool on a Saturday afternoon! This is a painful procedure. Timothy truly took one for the team here. Second, you have to understand that both Paul and Timothy knew that he was completely free from the law (just read Acts 15!). Paul himself said in Galatians 6:15:

<sup>15</sup> For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation.

Paul and Timothy knew that this circumcision was going to mean nothing before God. Timothy also knew that he was not obligated to undergo this procedure. Third, the **only** reason they had this done was for the sake of their ministry to the Jews. Their goal was to remove an unnecessary stumbling block so that the Jews would be offended, not by Timothy’s lack of circumcision, but by the real stone of stumbling, the offensive message of the cross! This is

what drove them to get Timothy circumcised. Fourth, now let me ask you, would you become a slave to the Jews for the sake of the advancement of the Gospel like this? Or would you get angry with the Jews and assert your freedom from the law? Would you be willing to undergo a medical procedure for the sake of winning more? Timothy didn't get circumcised because it was the hip and trendy thing to do. Timothy got circumcised because it was what had to be done for the sake of the advancement of the Gospel.

4. It is imperative to understand that becoming all things to all people does not mean that we do whatever it takes to win people to Jesus Christ. No, there are limits. Certainly, Paul does say in vs. 19 that we are to be slaves of everyone. But let me remind you of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:21-23.

<sup>21</sup> Were you called while a slave? It should not be a concern to you. But if you can become free, by all means take the opportunity. <sup>22</sup> For he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise, he who is called as a free man is Christ's slave. <sup>23</sup> You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.

So Paul tells us to **not** become slaves of men because we are slaves of God in 1 Corinthians 7 and then he turns around two chapters later and tell us to become slaves of everyone. How do we become slaves of everyone without becoming slaves of men? The answer is very simple. When I was in high school I worked at Subway. Yes... I was a sandwich artist. My job was to serve customers. Let's think about this for a moment. Did I really serve customers? Well... yes and no. I did serve customers. There is no doubt about that. But in the most ultimate sense I served my boss. The only reason I served customers was because that was the job that my boss gave me to do. Suppose a customer orders a sandwich and asks me for *free* extra cheese. I have to say, "No." The customer may reply, "But I thought you were here to serve the customer!" I would reply, "Well I am here to serve the customer, but I am ultimately serving my boss, which means that I can only serve the customer within the parameters which the boss has set." The same thing is true for the apostle Paul. Paul could become a slave of everyone but only as an extension of his ultimate submission to Jesus Christ.

So we do not become slaves of men in the ultimate sense of the word. We become slaves of men only in a limited sense. There are parameters. This is why Paul so heavily qualifies what he says in vs. 21: "To those without the law, like one without the law—*not being without God's law but within the law of Christ*—to win those without the law." He doesn't want the Corinthians for any second to even begin to think that he is an all out pragmatist. No, Paul is under the law of Christ. The law of Christ guides his slavery to men—the law of Christ sets the parameters of the task of becoming all things to all people. So when Paul says that he becomes all things to all people "so that I may **by every possible** means save some," he clearly cannot mean that he will even go to the length of transgressing God's clear word.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Carson is helpful here. "Although this passage is sometimes interpreted to mean that we should feel free to reshape the gospel when we move from culture to culture, that is exactly what Paul does *not* mean. Paul is prepared to be extraordinarily flexible wherever the law of God, mediated through Christ, does not impinge on him. But he himself is under 'Christ's law,' which in this epistle is clearly bound up with the gospel itself, the gospel of the crucified Messiah." DA Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 120. Wright is helpful as well. "This statement has sometimes been understood

But there are many in our culture who do unbiblical things in the name of becoming all things to all people. The test of whether one has truly become all things to all people, then, is not how many attend the service or how relevant everything seems or how many get a meaningful 'experience' when they come to the church. The true test is how faithful we are to the word of God as we seek to lay down our rights for the sake of winning souls to Jesus. Let me suggest that the size of the church can often times be a false indicator of how faithful a church is to the task of becoming all things to all people. Many assume that small churches haven't quite learned the principle. But this is to miss the clear words of Paul in 9:22b. Paul has quite the humble view about how fruitful this becoming all things to all people thing is going to be. He says that he becomes all things to all people "so that I may by every possible means save **some**." He does not have a bloated idea of how effective this will be to pack an auditorium. He understands that his attempts at adjusting to the sensibilities of the culture will result in the salvation of **some**. The test is self-denying faithfulness to the law of Christ, not the size of the church.

5. Becoming all things to all people does not mean that we are to target highly defined slices of society. What does Paul say? That he has become "all things to **all people**, so that I may by every possible means save some." The goal is not become all things to one slice of the culture, but to become all things to all people. Let me put it in a different way; Paul is not saying thing we are to become culturally super-charged. He is saying that we are to become culturally neutralized. Paul's focus was not on highly specified groups. Paul's goal was to be as versatile as possible so that he might reach as many as possible.<sup>6</sup> Many individuals and church's seek to be as culturally cutting edge and trendy as they possibly can. At the end of the day, however, they end up becoming completely irrelevant to everyone who doesn't fit into the hip and trendy part of the culture. This is not to say that we shouldn't use simple wisdom to discern certain facts about the community in which we are ministering. However, it does mean that some in the church move way beyond cultural relevance to cultural paranoia. They become so consumed with 'staying up with the Jones' as it were that they completely lose the center. We need to be careful that we do not become so focused in regard to who are targeting that we forget that there really is a way of communicating that does cross cultural boundaries, spans the

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as though it meant that Paul was a mere pragmatist, a spin-doctor, twisting his message this way and that to suit different audiences. That's not what he's saying. The **message** remains constant. It is the messenger who must swallow his pride, who must give up his rights, who must change his freedom into slavery. Woe betide those who trim the message so that they don't have to trim themselves." N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 117. In this sense, then, Witherington is correct to say that Paul "does not say that he became an idolater to idolaters or an adulterer to adulterers. But in matters that he did not see as ethically or theologically essential or implied by the gospel, Paul believed in flexibility." Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 213.

<sup>6</sup> Carson is helpful once again. "The aim is not to become so international and culturally flexible that one does *not* fit in anywhere; the aim, rather, is to become so understanding and flexible that one *can* soon fit in and further the gospel anywhere." Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 132. It must be said here that becoming all things to all people would look a different for Paul. He went traveling from culture to culture to culture planting churches. Those in the context in which I serve generally stay put in one place. Our goal is not to adjust on the fly, but to keep a calm finger on the pulse of the culture and make minor adjustments as needed (which really shouldn't be that often, because most significant cultural changes do not happen overnight).

generation gap, and effectively reaches both genders. The goal is to find that culturally neutralized zone and keep a pulse on the culture without becoming consumed with it.

6. Lastly, those of us who embrace the doctrines of grace need to understand that God ordains both the ends and the means. So often we Calvinists have a tendency to skirt our responsibilities by appealing to the sovereignty of God in election. It goes something like this, “Our job is **just** to preach the Gospel and leave the result up to God. After all, God is sovereign over salvation.” Certainly, the sovereignty of God is a mighty fine pillow upon which the fervent believer can rest his head at night, knowing that all results are ultimately in the hands of God. However, the sovereignty of God must never be used as a crutch or an excuse when we don’t want to give the advancement of the Gospel our all. Only those who labor for the advancement of the Gospel should rest their heads on the pillow of God’s sovereignty. Those who are not laboring in the fields, making themselves a slave to all so that by all means some might come to Christ should not rest assured. After all, God has ordained that the Gospel would spread through the faithful and selfless preaching of the Gospel. Our decisions truly can and do affect the forward advancement of the Gospel. If this doesn’t square with your theology, sorry! But this is the whole reason why Paul forfeited his right to compensation—“we enduring everything so that we will not hinder the gospel of Christ” (9:12). The clear implication is that it is possible to hinder the gospel of Christ. This seems like a bit of a paradox, but we have to remember that the same Paul who penned Romans 9 also penned 1 Corinthians 9. Our job is not to try and solve biblical paradoxes, but to faithfully live, believe, and obey God’s word whether we can make sense out of it or not.

## CONCLUSION

Tune in next week as we seek to build upon the foundation that has been laid this morning. The main point which I wish to leave you with is that of looking to Christ as your example. Keep in mind that God is not here calling you to something which He has not taken upon Himself. Becoming all things to all people is a life of voluntary slavery for the salvation of souls. It is my contention that the American church has completely misunderstood the main point of Paul’s instruction. The standard has been watered down by focusing on methods and form as opposed to focusing on the heart. The goal is not merely to adjust to the cultural sensibilities of those to whom you are ministering, but to adjust as a slave. The goal is to adopt the self-denying, self-sacrificial attitude of Christ. If you have come away from 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 without a profound awareness of your need for repentance and growth, I can say without hesitation that you haven’t truly learned what it is all about. May God grant us the grace to live as Jesus lived.