

“The Adaptable Disciple”—1 Corinthians 9:22-23

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “The Adaptable Disciple”, is 1 Corinthians 9:22-23 → *I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

How far are you willing to go in order to help someone? Parents proudly confess that they would do anything for their children, sometimes even to the point of compromising their principles or putting their own security at risk. Patriotism is expressed in a person’s willingness to support their country and even die defending it. Employers recognize a “treasure” when they discover an employee who is so dedicated to the company that he will risk ridicule from fellow workers in an effort to protect the best interests of the company.

Considering how far you may go to help a person demands a set of “standards” or “criteria” which will determine “the distance you will go” with your help. Such factors as the nature of your relationship; your analysis which determines whether that person is truly “worthy” of your help; the nature of the situation at hand, especially under the pressure of urgency and emergency; previous experience with the person’s

integrity, which can be very influential if the person had abused or taken advantage of you in the past; along with a host of other factors, many of which you may not even be aware is influencing your decision to help someone.

Now consider: How far would you go to help a person trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of his sins? This question embodies the discussion in our text as Paul talks about sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others. The key to this task is the willingness to be an adaptable disciple under the lordship of Jesus.

Adaptability has to do with changes and the adjustments which those changes demand of us. Change does not come easily for people. Your desire to help another person may be one of the most challenging, frustrating and emotionally taxing endeavors of your life, especially if that person doesn't think he needs help and doesn't want your help. Think of how difficult it is to help a person recognize that he is a sinner in need of the forgiveness of sins which can **only** be given through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul himself certainly understood the nature of change and adaptability having, within an instance, gone from being a killer of Christians to a maker of Christians—from apostasy to apostleship.

In our text, Paul stated that he was simply doing what his Master (i.e. Jesus) expected His slave (i.e. Paul) to do—to proclaim the Gospel to all people in an “adaptable” manner. In 1 Corinthians 9:19 he says,

*Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. He viewed himself as Christ's slave to others so that all people would hear of God's will for them, repent of their sin, trust in Jesus Christ and receive forgiveness of sins and new life through faith in Him. He described it in verses 22-23: *I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.**

*All things to all people?* Isn't that kind of extreme? How can you *become all things to all people* to win them for Jesus? It involves a **discerning** adaptation. In the desire to share Jesus with others it is very important to place the other person's needs **in relationship with Jesus** before your own. That's the gist of the word "understand." How can you strive to understand someone else if you don't allow yourself to "stand under" them for a time? Paul affirms the importance of learning about, respecting, and identifying with others in order to reach them effectively.

Paul expressed the importance of meeting people "where they are" in a desire to win them for Jesus Christ. It is important to be totally and sincerely concerned about the person whom Jesus wants you to *win* for Him. You do so by listening to them so you know how they think. You want to find out what's important to them. You listen as they talk about the kinds of principles which guide their living. You desire to bring the incarnational presence of Jesus to them as you are in their presence.

Jesus took on our human nature to live obediently under God's written law for you and be the final sacrifice for your sins! The adaptable disciple practices an incarnational service to others.

Even in His incarnation, eating and "hanging out" with sinners, Jesus did not join them in their sin. Notice when Paul talked about adapting himself to these various people he didn't become them. When it came to his freedom in Christ Paul would "bend" as far as *the law of Christ* would allow to keep the doors of sharing the Gospel open. An example of becoming like a Jew to win the Jews happened in Acts 16:23 → *Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.* In this case he was willing to perform circumcision according to the Old Testament Law in an effort to open a door for witnessing to the Jews in Lystra. This is how he *became as one under the law (though not being himself under the law) that he might win those under the law.* (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:20)

However, being an adaptable disciple is not simply turning oneself over to the all the whims of another person. Remember: You are Christ servant to others. Thus, you are striving to be faithful to Christ as you serve others. When Paul encountered Jewish Christians who insisted that the Gentile Christians in Galatia be circumcised to be saved he spoke out vehemently against it because doing so caused an offense to

the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It changed the pure Gospel into law. Thus his words in Galatians 5:2-4 → *Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.* Harsh words indeed. It is a very serious matter when a person strives to be an adaptable disciple by compromising salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ **alone!** The adaptable disciple is never *outside the law of God* and is, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:21, always *under the law of Christ*.

Paul engaged *those outside the law* in Athens, Greece—that is, people with no faith in Yahweh—by appealing to their own philosophers and religious objects of worship in an effort to share Christ with them. (cf. Acts 17:16-34) He was willing to give up his freedom to eat anything if it would bring offense to the Gospel by causing a fellow Christian who was “weak in faith and conscience” to turn away from Christ and His atonement. (1 Corinthians 8:9-13) As “adaptable” disciples of Jesus we will strive in humility to “relate” to others in order to bring them into contact with Jesus or build them up in their relationship with Christ on the basis of His Person & Work. Jesus described it in Matthew 16:24 → *If anyone would come after Me, **let him deny himself** and take up his cross and follow Me.* We strive to be faithful to Christ while ministering to people.

Why would you go so far, expend so much energy, emotion and time, denying your freedoms in Christ to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to others? *For the sake of the gospel.* **By the working of the Holy Spirit through the gospel you have experienced the blessings of the gospel in all its fullness in the Person & Work of Jesus Christ.** Thus you can *share with* those who repent and believe in Jesus *in its blessings*—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ **alone!**

How far would you go to help a person trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of his sins? All the way to the cross of Christ. You recognize that your efforts are frail in comparison to the sacrifice of your incarnate Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus tells you in Matthew 20:27-28 → *Whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, **and to give His life as a ransom for many.*** He isn't just placing the example of His self-sacrificing service before you as a model to follow, like "WWJD." **He's telling you that He did it for you!** Through faith in Him the Holy Spirit gives you the desire of Jesus for others. He gives you the desire to be His adaptable disciple, striving to be *all things to all people, that by all means* others might be saved! Amen.

Speaking of the Gospel Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:7 →

*We have this treasure in jars of clay,  
to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

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