



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 9:19-27

Topic

Paul explains that he considered limiting his liberties a small cost in order to always be in a position to preach the Gospel and win others to Jesus

Title

"Let's Win at Small Cost"

Introduction

In my research this week I was surprised how often I encountered the words "athletes" and "ambassadors" in the same sentence. Whether describing elite Olympians or local high schoolers, somewhere along the line you read something like, "athletes are ambassadors" representing their country or their school.

Ambassadors and athletes are prominent in the last verses of First Corinthians nine. In fact, the apostle Paul tells us that *every* Christian ought to consider themselves both an ambassador for Jesus Christ and an elite athlete competing to win the ultimate prize.

I don't know about you, but for me these analogies are extremely helpful. They can refocus my attention on what I ought to be doing each day in my walk with the Lord.

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Let's take a look at ourselves as ambassadors and athletes who represent Jesus. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Are An Ambassador Called Upon To Make Sacrifices In Order To Win Men To Jesus, and #2 You Are An Athlete Called Upon To Make Sacrifices In Order To Win Mention From Jesus.

#1 You Are An Ambassador
Called Upon To Make Sacrifices In Order To Win Men To Jesus
(v19-23)

We are in the middle of a three-chapter discussion on the topic of limiting our Christian liberty for the sake of others.

What is Christian liberty? In part it is your freedom to partake of things in the world that are not inherently sinful but that might seem questionable. Historically the list of questionable things has included drinking alcohol, smoking, dancing, gambling, going to certain movies or theater performances, celebrating certain holidays, the wearing of make-up and the wearing of certain clothing, and the like.

In Corinth the thing that was causing trouble was the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. The believers who claimed their liberty to eat the meat were not taking into account the effect of their liberty upon their brothers and sisters in Jesus whose consciences were troubled by the practice.

In chapter eight Paul concluded that love limits liberty. In other words, you ought always to take into consideration how the exercise of your liberty will effect your fellow believers. If it will in any way stumble them then you must adjust your behavior accordingly.

In the first verses of chapter nine Paul used himself as an example of limiting liberty for the sake of others. Now he is ready to share with the believers that limiting liberty is not something negative that ought to cause us to be discouraged or frustrated. It is something desirable.

Paul started by comparing himself and every other believer to an ambassador. In verses nineteen through twenty-three he describes himself as the Lord's ambassador to various groups of people and describes why he limits his liberty in different ways among each of them. It is to "win" them for the Lord.

1 Corinthians 9:19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;

Let me read another great verse on this subject. It's Galatians 5:13.

Galatians 5:13 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.

In other words, don't automatically claim some liberty just for the sake of self-satisfaction. Sacrifice it if it will put you in a better position to serve others.

Oswald Chambers is quoted as saying, "The true mark of the saint is that he can waive his own rights and obey the Lord Jesus."

Paul was "free from all men" in the sense that he could exercise liberty in every questionable thing. Instead he looked at his life as one of joyful sacrifice so he could always be in the position of serving others. He didn't want some practice of his to interfere with his ability to share the good news about Jesus. He wanted to "win" others to faith in Jesus Christ, not put them off.

He saw himself as a citizen of Heaven on assignment as an ambassador on the earth. In the next few verses he described the groups he was among to whom he desired to represent Jesus.

1 Corinthians 9:20 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;
1 Corinthians 9:21 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;
1 Corinthians 9:22 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.

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Paul had no problem being kosher around Jews! They were still “under the Law” of Moses. They practiced circumcision, observed certain dietary restrictions, celebrated certain days on the calendar. Among them he could function “as under the Law.” He could respect their customs without adopting them as being necessary for salvation. He could limit certain liberties because he loved the Jews and wanted to see them get saved.

Those “without Law” in verse twenty-one are the Gentiles. They are all the non-Jews. Around them Paul was *not* Kosher! He did not insist they be circumcised or that they restrict their diet or that they observe certain holy days. He acted as if he were “without Law.” He meant that his behavior around Gentiles was not in strict outward conformity with the Law of Moses.

He was quick to add, however, that he wasn’t breaking any of God’s moral laws by not keeping the ceremonial ones. As a Christian he let the love of Christ be his “law,” guiding his every action.

His motive for this was to “win” Gentiles to Jesus Christ.

The “weak” in verse twenty-two restates what he had concluded in chapter eight. Around Christians who had a weak conscience about certain questionable things he limited his liberty. In their case he didn’t need to “win” them to salvation. His use of “win” is in the sense of not seeing them stumbled in their walk.

No matter who he was around Paul never violated his own biblical morality and he never diluted or altered the message of the Gospel. His methods were adaptable, however, in order that Jesus might be glorified through his sharing of the Gospel.

The bottom line for Paul is found in the words that end verse twenty-two: “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” If your motive is to see men, women, and children get saved and then be strengthened rather than stumbled, you will adjust your life and lifestyle to best serve them.

1 Corinthians 9:23 Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

It may require what seems to be sacrifice. But it is really a very small sacrifice because you embrace representing Jesus Christ as an ambassador as a great and precious privilege.

It is by those sacrifices of his liberty that Paul was “a partaker of” the Gospel. “Partake” can mean *participate*. He was more interested in participating with God and with Christians in sharing the Gospel than he was in participating in some personal liberty.

In Corinth it meant you would rather go to the church pot-luck and eat whatever was prepared by the saints rather than go to the feast to some idol and eat the world’s best meat. And it meant that you were joyful while doing so because, after all, you were an ambassador for the Lord with a higher calling.

Behind his practical advice is Paul’s passion to see people either get saved or be strengthened in their relationship with Jesus. Have you been won to Jesus Christ? The Gospel Paul keeps referring to is the truth that God became man in order to take your place and die on your behalf as a substitute and sacrifice for sin. Then He rose from the dead! He is thus the Savior of all men and He becomes your Savior when you believe on Him. It’s the only way for a person to be saved and be guaranteed Heaven after death. No amount of religious works can save. It is the free gift of God to those who believe on Jesus.

You’re also to consider yourself an athlete, an elite athlete, competing at the highest level.

#2 You Are An Athlete

Called Upon To Make Sacrifices In Order To Win Mention From Jesus

(v24-27)

Corinth sponsored what was called the Isthmian Games. These contests were second only to the Olympics in Athens in terms of fame and popularity

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in the Roman Empire. Everyone in the church at Corinth was familiar with the athletes of the Isthmian Games.

1 Corinthians 9:24 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.

The competitors in the Isthmian Games had to first prove that they had been in rigorous physical and mental training for a full ten months prior to the games. The last month was spent in Corinth with supervised daily work-outs in the gymnasiums and on the fields.

These athletes were serious. They knew that their daily training would put them in a position to “run” to be the one who “receives the prize.” *None of them trained for second place.*

The Christian life is a competition. You’re not competing against other believers, however. You’re competing against yourself! For one thing you are competing against what the Bible calls “the flesh.” It is the habits and preferences of your old, sin nature that would have you indulge yourself in ways that are ultimately detrimental to making progress in your walk with the Lord.

1 Corinthians 9:25 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.

An athlete in training is “temperate in all things.” It means they exercise self-restraint in every area in order to be at their very best. They adjust their diet, their sleep cycles, and their social and personal calendars in order to be at their best.

People like to point to natural ability in athletes to say that some don’t need to be “temperate in all things.” Babe Ruth might be the poster child for intemperance. But the Bambino’s legendary excess isn’t the whole story. Listen to these biographical excerpts.

Babe Ruth was only thirty years old in the Spring of 1925 and his body was failing him... There was talk that he might be finished. The... the Babe had failed his body, with... too

much food, alcohol and fast living. It all caught up with him that year; he collapsed, suffered a series of convulsions and was operated on for an intestinal problem.

[Ruth] ... found his way to a gymnasium in New York City... Artie McGovern and his Madison Avenue [Gym]. Artie stated that Ruth was 'as near to being a total loss as any patient I have ever had under my care.' He weighed 254 pounds, his digestive system was a wreck, his muscles were soft and flabby, the slightest exertion caused him to be short of breath and even his vision was affected. Artie preached... exercise and a healthy diet.

Babe Ruth, who had been on the verge of losing both his health and his baseball career, listened and followed this new regime... In six weeks, his body's decline was halted and reversed... he lost 44 pounds. When training for the 1926 season began, Babe was tan, healthy and filled with optimism and everyone noticed. Babe spent every winter, for the rest of his playing career, training with Artie McGovern.

It's too easy to think we are the pre-1926 Babe Ruth when it comes to the need for spiritual discipline. After all, we're saved and headed home. Ours is a life of grace not law. But if we let ourselves go by indulging in liberties we will not be the vibrant Gospel-sharing believers we want to be. We need to instead get into the spiritual gymnasium of the various disciplines of the Christian life.

1 Corinthians 9:26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air.

Paul made a funny! When he said, "not with uncertainty," he pictured a runner who, upon hearing the "Go!" started running in the wrong direction. He didn't have the finish line in view but ran all over the place.

For emphasis he switched from the track to the ring. He pictured a boxer "beat[ing] the air." He was not talking about shadowboxing. That's a good training discipline. No, he was picturing a boxer coming out and throwing punches that never landed. All that's going to do is leave him exhausted.

- You may be running but if you're not set on the finish line you are only running in place.
- You may think you're fighting but if you're not landing any blows you are only going to exhaust yourself and be susceptible to knock-out.

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What's the bottom line?

1 Corinthians 9:27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Keep this in context. By “discipline” and “subjection” Paul meant that he limited his liberties for the sake of preaching the Gospel in order to be in the best position to win others. Within the larger context of Christian discipline he was talking specifically about their social behaviors.

The Corinthians eating meat sacrificed to idols and flaunting it were reading, praying, attending church, exercising gifts of the Spirit, etc., etc. All of their so-called spiritual activities were being cancelled out by their lack of love toward their fellow believers. Paul was saying that their refusal to limit liberty for the sake of the Gospel was causing them to run in place and beat the air with their blows.

He was humorously picturing what they looked like spiritually as Christian athletes. *They looked like the guy who scores the touchdown for the opposing team!*

Paul didn't want to get to the end of his own “race” on the earth and be “disqualified.” He was thinking of his future meeting with Jesus Christ in Heaven after he died or was raptured as if it were like the Reward Seat of the Isthmian Games. There the victorious athlete would be given the laurel wreath and earn the praises of the judge.

Or he would be disqualified for any of a number of things!

Let me point out that if the athlete was disqualified he would remain a citizen of Rome. We're not suggesting in any way that disqualification means you forfeit eternal life and are lost for eternity.

You might, however, forfeit your eternal rewards. And even before you get to the end of your race you will forfeit your effectiveness for Jesus and hinder your testimony.

Keep all this in its context. You have liberty in questionable things. But you are to limit your liberty the way an ambassador or an athlete does.

Which version of Babe Ruth do you want to be? Post-1925, of course. So watch those liberties and, simultaneously, stay in the gymnasium of the Christian disciples.

What are they? The classic disciplines are to read and study the Bible; to talk to the Lord in prayer; to fellowship with other believers; and to share your faith in Christ.

To those four foundational disciplines we would add two more that Jesus mentioned: Giving of your material resources and fasting.

Run and fight to win others and to win the prize for yourself as a participant with Jesus in the Gospel.