

This morning, I am continuing in my sermon series called The Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, a church he started around the year 50 AD. He has since left the church in the hands of other leaders so that he might start other churches, and he writes this letter around the year 54-55 AD in response to what he is hearing about some of the issues in the Corinthian church. Last week, Paul began to address an issue that is threatening to divide or destroy the church – **how they should interact with the rampant idolatry in their city**. Corinth was in Greece and was part of the Roman Empire. It was therefore a polytheistic city, with many gods and goddesses and temples to those deities, and so it was a regular part of civic life to attend banquets in temples and homes where you would eat food that was sacrificed to those idols. For a church community that believed that there was only one God, and that idol worship was sinful, this was a tricky subject for a young church to navigate. As you'll see, some people found eating food that had been dedicated to idols to be morally wrong, while others did not, and it was causing conflict.

Now, of course, most of us don't have to deal with that specific issue in today's world, but the principles Paul lays out in these passages on how to navigate these issues where Christians disagree are very relevant today. Last week, he encouraged the Corinthians to abide by this principle: **in Christ we have freedom, but we are to use that freedom not to serve our own interests but to serve others**. Last week we talked about how this has relevance to all kinds of things from drinking alcohol to the media we take in. In today's passage, he is going to continue to expand upon that principle. In the first part of chapter 9, Paul uses an example from his own life to show how as followers of Jesus, we are to be willing to give up our rights for the good of others:

1 Corinthians 9:1-27 - Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? ² Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. ³ This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. ⁴ Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? ⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? ⁸ Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was

written for us, because when the plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? **But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.** ¹³ Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. ¹⁵ **But I have not used any of these rights.** And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. ¹⁶ Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? **Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.**

Listen carefully to Paul's argument. In these verses, he gives many examples of how people and even animals should profit from their own labor – soldiers, farmers, shepherds, and even oxen. He tells them that as an apostle, as the one who started their church, he has the right to make a living from that work through the offerings of the church. ¹⁴ *In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.* However, he tells them that despite having this right, he gave up that right, because he did not want money to hinder the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. He wanted to offer the gospel to them free of charge. Most likely, Paul's concern was that in Corinthian culture, **patronage** was a big part, and clients were indebted to the patrons who supported them financially. And so he would not take money from them, because he did not want to be obligated to any person, but he wanted to work and make his own money so that he could preach the gospel freely and only be obligated to God.

So why is he telling them this? Paul is using his own personal situation to give them an example of what he is encouraging them to do with regards to eating meat sacrificed to idols: **in Christ we have freedom and rights, but we are to use our freedom and rights not to please ourselves, but to serve others.** Paul was willing to set aside his financial rights for the sake of others, so that nothing would hinder the proclamation of the gospel and the likelihood of others being saved. In the same way, he is encouraging them to adopt the same mindset with regards to eating food that has been sacrificed to idols – instead of eating it, give up your right to do it so

that you might serve others who might fall into idolatry through your actions, and not communicate to the watching world that worshiping any god other than the one true God is okay. Continuing:

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. ²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. ²⁷ No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

In this section, Paul expands upon his point. He is willing to be sensitive to whatever people he finds himself among out of a desire that as many as possible might be saved by the gospel. Instead of using his freedom to do what he pleases, he becomes a slave to everyone, willingly giving up his rights and becoming like the people to whom he is ministering, that they might be saved. Whatever will bring God maximum glory and give the opportunity for the maximum number of people to be saved is what he wants, no matter what the personal cost to him might be.

He finishes his argument by giving them a sports analogy. Corinth hosted an athletic competition called the Isthmian games every other year. And so, they would have been familiar with how athletes go into strict training to win the prize in a competition. For those athletes, everything else is subservient to the goal of winning the prize. It is no different today. Think of Tom Brady and his **TB12 diet**, where he forgoes most things we enjoy eating, replacing it with lots of veggies, water infused with electrolytes, fruit & nut smoothies, and protein shakes, all with the goal of playing at a high level longer than anyone ever has.

And then Paul makes the point that these athletes are doing it for a **garland of leaves** that will wither and die! How much more so for the crown that will last forever!

Once again, the specific situation – whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols – may not be relevant to most of us today, but the principles behind the discussion are very relevant. Let me share three main implications from this passage for us today:

1) **Radically redefine freedom**

We touched on this four weeks ago, but it's worth highlighting again, since Paul radically redefines freedom in this passage:

Am I not free?

⁴ *Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?*

¹⁴ *In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel. ¹⁵ But I have not used any of these rights.*

¹⁹ *Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.*

There was a Stoic saying in Paul's day that **"the free man is the one who does as he wishes without regard for the opinions of others."** Sounds very familiar to our modern ears, doesn't it? To thine own self be true. Look inside, find out who you truly are and what you desire, and then do what feels right to you and don't worry what anyone else says – parents, religion, society, the crowd. You be you, no matter what. That is the modern definition of freedom – the absence of restriction. And then here comes Paul saying:

¹⁹ *Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.*

Or as he will say in the next chapter:

1 Corinthians 10:23-24 - "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is constructive. ²⁴ Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Our culture has bought into the belief that freedom is the absence of restriction. But I want to submit to you that this is wrong. **Freedom is not the absence of rules or restrictions.** Consider the bird: freedom for the **bird** is not swimming. Freedom for the **fish** is not going on dry land. Freedom for the **pianist** is not just playing whatever keys they want, but disciplining herself to the rules of the piano until she can freely play anything. Freedom for the **basketball player** is not doing whatever he wants, but submitting himself to the rules of the game and the best possible training until he can do anything on a basketball court. Freedom for the **car owner** is not doing whatever he wants to his car, but submitting to the scheduled maintenance so that the car will perform at its best for a long time. Freedom as the absence of restrictions eventually leads to breakdown, to chaos, to death. Freedom as submission to the right discipline, to the way something was designed, brings true freedom. True freedom is not the absence of restriction, but living as God intended you to live. And God intends you to live in relationship with Him, in righteousness, in holiness, in love. **That means that my authentic self is not found by searching my heart and emotions and living according to them, but is found in living according to the will of the one who designed me, submitting to His plan.**

The more you exercise the freedom to drink, the more you become a slave to that. The more you indulge your sex drive, the more you become a slave to that. The more you do any number of things contrary to God's will, the more you become enslaved by that. The more our culture becomes one where people seek out freedom as the absence of restriction, the more our nation will devolve into chaos. But the more we find the true freedom that comes from knowing Christ, the more we will reach our fullest potential.

Think of Jesus' radical words on freedom: **Matthew 16:24-26** - *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his **life** will lose it, but whoever **loses** his **life** for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*

There is something mysterious and completely counter-cultural going on in this passage. Paul is telling us that true freedom and life is not found in just doing

whatever we think is right for us, but it is living according to how we were designed. **And we were designed to use our freedom to serve God and others – that, according to Jesus, is where we will truly find our life.** How is this possible?

2) Be culturally flexible for the sake of the gospel

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Paul was not a chameleon. He isn't watering down the message. But he could adapt himself to his changing audiences. With the Jews, he bowed to synagogue discipline, and Timothy was circumcised in order to reach the Jews. With the Gentiles, he lived under grace and quoted their poets. With the weak, he lowered himself socially.

In all of this, he emulated Christ, who became like us so that we might be saved.

Hebrews 2:14-15 - *Since the children have **flesh and blood**, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

We don't go out expecting people to come to us and be like us. Living like Jesus means being willing to enter into the lives of others and meet them on their terms, within the bounds of faithfulness to Jesus, so as to share the gospel with them.

3) Bring everything in submission to the primary passion

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. ²⁷ No, I beat my body and make

it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Maybe you understand the point Paul is making, but you're not convinced that you should live your life giving up your freedom and rights for the sake of others. So the question still remains: why? Why should I give up my rights and my freedoms to serve others? Why not just do as I please and do whatever feels right to me? Why not eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols? Why not just consume whatever media I want, or food and drink I want, or use my time as I please? Why fast? Why tithe? Why give? Why serve? What is my motivation?

In this last section, Paul uses the analogy of the race and the victor's crown. He talks about how athletes go into strict training – saying no to lavish living, tempting dishes, or pleasurable drinks in order to be in the best possible shape for the race. **If you want the crown, he says, then everything else must be under control – diet, sleep, social life, thought life.** That one passion – to win the prize – must control every other passion and desire.

Paul uses this analogy to communicate to the Corinthians that as a follower of Christ, everything must come under the grand passion of honoring Christ and spreading the gospel. Paul tells them that like an athlete training for the gold medal or the crown of olive leaves, Paul will discipline his body and mind so that he might be singularly focused in service to the Lord. He tells them that he is willing to lay down any right and forego any other desire or advantage for the sake of seeing others come to know Jesus. **And if that means not eating meat that has been sacrificed to an idol, so be it.**

²³ *I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

The word for this is **self-control**. Self-control, Biblically speaking, is rightly ordering your loves. It is making sure that the number one passion of your heart is to know Jesus and to see others come to know Him, so that every other desire and passion would be subject to that. **Sin, on the other hand, is disordered love, as Augustine put it.** Sin is having your loves out of order, so that there is something else – career, family, self – that you love more than God, so that when those two things are in conflict, you choose something other than God. And that sin, that choice, will bring breakdown and chaos into your life.

So where do you get this kind of self-control? **What could convince anyone to put Jesus above hobbies, careers, food, family, romantic love, or technology?**

To answer that question, let's look at another passage that uses the metaphor of a race:

Hebrews 12:1-3 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Where does the motivation come from? Fix your eyes on Jesus. For the joy before Him, he endured the cross, running the race of faith to the very end. What was the joy set before Him? It was the only thing He did not have in heaven: You! You were the passion of His heart that allowed Him to endure the cross, to endure opposition from sinful men, to scorn the shame of the cross. On that cross, did he receive the victor's crown of olive leaves? No – he received a very different crown, a crown of thorns pressed into his brow. He took the crown of thorns so that you might receive the crown of life. He received the punishment so that you might gain freedom. He died so that you might live eternally.

Listen to Brennan Manning speak of this love in his book *The Signature of Jesus*:

“On the night of December 13, during what began as a long and lonely hour of prayer, I heard in faith Jesus Christ say, ‘For love of you I left my Father’s side. I came to you who ran from me, fled me, who did not want to hear my name. For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten, and affixed to the wood of the cross.’

These words are burned on my life. Whether I am in a state of grace or disgrace, elation or depression, that night of fire quietly burns on. I looked at the crucifix for a long time, figuratively saw the blood streaming from every pore of his body, and heard the cry of his wounds: ‘This isn’t a joke. It is not a laughing matter to me that I have loved you.’ The longer I looked, the more I realized that no man has ever loved me and no one ever could love me as he did. I went out of the cave, stood on the precipice, and shouted into the darkness, ‘Jesus, are you crazy? Are you out of your mind to have loved me so much?’ I learned that night what a wise old man had told me years

earlier: 'Only the one who has experienced it can know what the love of Jesus Christ is. Once you have experienced it, nothing else in the world will seem more beautiful or desirable.'

What would motivate Paul to take his freedom and use it to serve others? What would compel him to take his rights and lay them down and become a slave? His eyes were fixed on Jesus. He saw the one who gave up His rights and laid down His life to save Him and give Him eternal life. **Paul understood that true joy is not found in playing video games all day or eating all the food you want or traveling to exotic destinations having multiple sexual partners. True joy is found in living as the man or woman God has created you to be,** doing the good works God prepared in advance for you to do, being a part of bringing men and women from eternal death to eternal life, seeing people set free from bondage to sin and fear of death by the gospel of Jesus Christ. And if I have to give up eating meat so that others might be saved, then sign me up. If I need to submit to the Jewish laws so that my brothers might hear about Jesus, then I'm in. If I need to give up my financial advantage and work so that money might not come between anyone and Jesus, then take my paycheck. If I must go hungry, be shipwrecked, whipped, mistreated, misunderstood, unmarried, no children, betrayed, rejected, and alone so that more people might hear the gospel and come to Jesus, then take my life, Lord, because You are worth it.

Do you believe that true joy is found not in doing whatever you want but in living as the person God created you to be? That the good life is found in aligning every other passion and desire underneath the primary passion of honoring God and sharing the gospel with others? If I need to get up early, turn off the TV, put away my phone, talk to my neighbor, pray for the lost, serve in the nursery, make an extra meal for someone in need, call up someone who is lonely, visit someone in prison, God, whatever it is that you need from me, it is yours! Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee! As Jesus said:

Matthew 13:44-46 - *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." ⁴⁵ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*

The crown of olive leaves withers and dies over time. The rewards of this life do not last, and you can not take them with you. The money, the possessions, the experiences - all of it will fade away in the end. It does not endure. Jesus is the

treasure hidden in the field. Jesus is the pearl of great price. **And that crown that lasts forever?** Listen to Paul again:

***Philippians 4:1** - Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and **crown**, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!*

***1 Thessalonians 2:19-20** - For what is our hope, our joy, or the **crown** in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

Paul tells those who he has brought to faith in Christ and discipled: you are my crown. You see, the things of this world come and go. You can use your freedom to do whatever you please, and you can use your rights to benefit yourself. But in the end it will all burn up, it will all have been for nothing. **What lasts forever is people.** The metaphorical crown that lasts forever, the glory we will share in, I believe, is the men and women who will be there in heaven because of us, because of our service. That is the true crown, the true glory, that will last forever.

The race is hard. It will break your heart and body. It will take discipline and sacrifice to endure it. But you will make it to the finish line by fixing your eyes on Jesus. He is the passion that orders every other passion, the joy above every other joy. Look at Him, who endured the cross all for the joy set before him. And that joy was you. He received the crown of thorns so that you might receive the crown of life, the crown that will last, so that you might share in His glory and joy and love forever. Let yourself be seized by the power of His great affection, that He might be your primary passion.

At the end of his great chapter on the resurrection, Paul writes this:

***1 Corinthians 15:58** - Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. **Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord**, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

Amen.