

A Heart for the Gospel

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Date: 15 May 2005

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians 9, verse 15 We need to get a little bit of background to find out what Paul is doing at this stage in the letter.

We're coming in without having heard all the other chapters, and it will be very easy for us to lose our way in this passage if we didn't know what his main theme is. He's writing, as I said, to a church in Corinth which was founded through his own ministry.

He took the gospel there, and many people believed. In Acts we read that God told him, I have many people in this city. So it was a collection of house churches that joined together, but which were at this point in their history beginning to fragment and to divide.

They were dividing over human leaders, some like Paul and others didn't. Some wanted Apollos, some wanted Cephas. Some were even saying, well, Jesus is our only leader. But there were divisions amongst them, and the opening chapter of the letter laments the fact that they are beginning to fall apart, and that the gospel that should be holding them together is being neglected. Corinth was a very glitzy, trendy place to be. It was a cosmopolitan city. It was a great trading center. There was a good deal of wealth in Corinth, and a good deal of sophistication too.

[1 : 44] It was called New Corinth. It had been rebuilt a hundred years earlier by Julius Caesar, and it was a very impressive sort of city. In the Corinthian church, there were two ways in which they were being influenced by the culture around them.

There were people in Corinth who said, if you're going to expect us to believe the Christian message, we need to see great signs from heaven. We need to see demonstrations of God's power, supernatural power in the church.

And the Jewish Christians in the Corinthian community were very much influenced by that. They wanted signs of power. Chapter 1 says to us that Jews demand signs.

But the Greeks, the Gentiles, they were much more interested in sophisticated wisdom. In Greek culture, the equivalent to our TV pundits and personalities these days, were traveling philosophers who went around the Greek world sharing their own ideas about life, the universe, and everything. And many of them were very attractive speakers, and they were very well paid for it. They were the sort of media personalities of their day. And the Greeks in the churches in Corinth, the little house churches, were saying, we've got to have much, much better communicators, skilled rhetoricians, people who are charismatic personalities.

[3 : 11] So the Jewish Christians are saying we need demonstrations of power from heaven. And the Greek Christians are saying we want much better communicators. Paul is rather predictable.

He's not an exciting personality. He hasn't been able to draw in all the sophisticated people in Corinth who would respond to a really impressive performer. And Paul's answer is neither of those things are what the church needs.

Just flip back with me to chapter 1 for a moment, and then we'll come back to chapter 9. If you've got your Bible open, have a look at chapter 1, verse 22. For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. You see what he's saying? You want power?

You'll find it in Jesus Christ crucified. You want God's wisdom? You'll see it in Jesus Christ crucified. And the reason he says that is this. Because it is only the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dying on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, that is the only news that will save people, save them from God's wrath and judgment, bring them through this world to heaven.

[4 : 52] There is no other message that will bring people out of darkness into light, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God. You see the power and wisdom of God in the cross of Jesus Christ.

And yes, says Paul, I know that it seems foolish and weak, but it only seems like that to people who are perishing. To us who are being saved, it is the power and the wisdom of God.

And if you're a Christian tonight, you know that's true. You're only a Christian because of the cross of Jesus. Nothing else can save you, in time or for eternity.

The Jesus who came to reveal God to us in his perfect life, died that atoning death in our place on the cross. And we share the forgiveness that flows from his sacrifice, for he bore the punishment for our sin.

He took the aching load of our rebellion off our shoulders and carried them on his own shoulders as he hung on that cross as the Lamb of God, bearing away the sin of the world.

[5 : 58] And the Jesus who died in order that we might be forgiven was raised again on Easter morning, on the third day, by the power of God to an endless life.

He ascended to heaven. He reigns in glory tonight at the right hand of the Father. And he will come again as the judge of the living and the dead. Christianity is all about Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, the one who loved us and gave himself for us, the one who conquered sin and death and hell, the only one who can give us eternal life, the only one who can unite us together as his body, the church.

And all of this is shorthanded by Paul in one word. He calls it the gospel. This is the gospel. Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Now, come back with me to chapter 9, and I want to take as our text this evening, verse 23. I want us to range around it a little bit, but it's the theme tune of the talk as it is of the passage.

Here's the main thing that Paul is saying. Verse 23 of chapter 9. I do it all, and he's been talking about his whole ministry, for the sake of the gospel that I may share with them in its blessings.

[7 : 19] I do it all for the sake of the gospel. Now, I wonder how that strikes you. You see, he's been telling us, as we read the passage through, maybe you remember some of the things he said, some of the ways in which the gospel has impacted his life.

Just look with me at verse 15. He says, I haven't made use of any of my rights. Why? All for the sake of the gospel. Or look at verse 19.

Though I am free from all, I've made myself a servant to all. Why? That I might win more of them for the sake of the gospel. Or verse 22.

To the weak I became weak that I might win the weak. I've become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel.

You see, what he's saying is, the gospel controls my whole life. All the decisions I make, all the way in which I live my life, is actually controlled by this great concern, that as many people as possible may come to hear and understand the good news of Jesus, the gospel, and be saved.

[8 : 36] that they may be rescued from God's righteous wrath which will otherwise send them to hell and brought into the experience of God's grace and love and peace and share in the blessings of heaven.

Now my friends, if all that is true, it is the most important thing that anybody could hear in this world. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not just moderately interesting. It is either the most important good news the world has ever heard or it's a hoax.

It's a delusion. Ultimately, it's a con. Now I wonder if that strikes you as being a bit extreme. But you see, Paul is very extreme about the gospel.

It seems as though this man is obsessed by the gospel. His whole life is dominated by the message of Christ. And we tend to look at Paul and we say, well, surely there ought to be a bit of balance, a bit of moderation, oughtn't there, Paul.

This seems very extremist and we in our generation are not very good at handling extremism. We like to be cool, laid back, low profile. It's a bit embarrassing to have someone who says, my whole life is consumed by the gospel.

[9 : 53] I like the story of the elderly minister who was speaking in a public meeting about the authority of the Bible. He did his very best in the talk but he was fairly elderly and very tired when he finished and then there were the questions to come and he wasn't really on best form of the question and the first question said, well, the trouble with you is that you're an extremist.

You believe the whole Bible is the word of God. That's a very extremist position to which his reply was extremist. Well, yes, maybe I am an extremist but if I'm an extremist it's because I'm extremely right and you're extremely wrong.

And if you think that Paul is an extremist it could just be that he's extremely right. I give my life, he says, for the gospel.

Now, again, I put up my defences at this point, don't you? I say, oh, but Paul was an apostle and I'm not. Thank God. He was an eyewitness of the risen Lord.

I haven't seen Jesus. Well, yes, he was called to be a missionary to the Gentile world and for many of us that will not be our calling, at least not in a full-time sense.

[11:09] But every Christian is totally dependent on this gospel for our very existence spiritually. And the more the good news of Jesus dominates our lives and our choices, verse 23 says, the more we shall share in its blessings.

And one thing I've learned in my 30 or 40 years of Christian work and ministry is that there is no more miserable person in this world than a half-hearted Christian. If you want to be really miserable, be half committed to Jesus Christ.

You can't enjoy the world and you can't enjoy Jesus because your heart is divided. I remember well as a student, used to be a favourite student leisure activity in the university where I was to go punting on the river at this time of year in May.

Very nice thing to do on a sunny afternoon like today. When I took to punting, I very quickly learnt one lesson. That is that when you go punting, you either have to have two feet on the bank or two feet in the punt.

It is not possible to have one foot on the bank and one foot in the punt, at least not for long, without some disastrous consequence. And it's like that in the Christian life.

[12:24] If you want to be miserable, be half-hearted. But if you put your two feet in the boat with Jesus Christ, you will share in the blessings of the gospel. Now in the time remaining, I just want to take three simple statements, there are three points tonight, which I hope will challenge and help us to see why this is something we should embrace for ourselves.

Firstly, in verse 15, his statement, I have not made use of any of these rights. And I want to call this heading, Settle Your Priority.

If we're to have a heart for the gospel, we need to be people who have settled our priorities. I wonder if you know that little poem by A.A. Milne that says, there was an old sailor my grandfather knew who had so many things that he wanted to do that whenever he thought it was time to begin, he couldn't because of the state he was in.

And there are lots of Christians like that. Most of us fail to be what we ought to be for God, not by great disobedience, not by moral failure, but by just not getting ourselves organized.

Failing even to realize and settle this priority that we are going to live for Christ and the gospel. And the reason is that it all looks too demanding.

[13:49] I have made no use of any of these rights, Paul says. Well now, what are these rights? Well, if you track back to verse 4, you'll find that he tells us, do we not have the right to eat and drink?

Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? That is, working in secular work in order to be paid.

What he's saying is that the right is to be supported in the ministry by the material gifts of the church at Corinth. And he says, that is a right that I have. It's taught by common sense and practice.

Verse 7, a soldier is paid for his work, a man who plants a vineyard eats the fruit, and the man who tends the flock gets some of the milk. That's common sense. And it's also supported by the law of God.

Verse 8, doesn't the law say the same? For in the law of Moses, verse 9, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain. And is he just thinking about oxen? No, he's thinking about Christian ministers.

[14:46] It's a very flattering comparison, isn't it? The oxen and the Christian minister. Now, God, he says, is writing because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher should thresh in hope of sharing the crop.

So, what he's saying is, I have every right to be supported materially in order that I can give my full time to the work of the gospel and Christian people a right to do it. But, I've not used any of these

rights.

So, the application can't really be argued with, can it? Verse 11 says, if we've sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things?

Can't really argue with that. He clearly states it in verse 14. In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

It's perfectly right. But, you see, Paul has settled his priority and his priority is not his rights. He deliberately sets his rights on one side and he tells us why in verse 12.

[15 : 49] We have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel. See, he's settled the priority.

The most important thing in his life is that the gospel should be spread by his living. And if he's being supported by the Christians at Corinth, there might well be people who in that culture would say, oh, well, that fellow Paul you know, he's only a gospel preacher, he's a travelling lecturer, so that he can make a good living out of it.

Don't bother to listen to him, he's just in it for what he can get. And he says, so that people won't have the opportunity of saying that and rejecting the gospel, I would rather sit up at night making tents, because that's how he supported himself, rather than hinder the progress of the gospel.

I would rather preach voluntarily, he says in verse 18, and be content with the reward that I can offer the gospel free of charge, so that nobody can attribute false motives to the preacher and close their ears to the message.

Well, that's very striking, isn't it? He's settled his priority, it's the gospel that dictates it all. Now, let's come to us. What about your priorities? What about our bottom line in our lives?

[17 : 10] We have lots of rights. We live in a society that is very strong on its rights, personal freedoms, the right of a home, the right of employment, the right of food and clothing and leisure time and possessions, and they are not wrongs, they are rights.

But have you settled the priority that nothing is going to hinder the gospel? However much God may prosper and bless you, you're not going to let anything distract you from Christ and the gospel being first in your life.

See, that's what God is calling us to do. We may not all be called to full-time Christian ministry. How would people be supported if everybody was doing full-time Christian ministry?

Maybe God wants you to be one of the supporters in prayer and financial giving. That will affect your rights, won't it? It will be determined by what your priority is. God may call you to a successful career.

He may prosper you in your business. I hope he does. That will be God's goodness in your life. But remember, whatever he gives you is a trust to be used for the gospel.

[18 : 24] So don't set your heart on false riches which last so short a time. Lay up treasure in heaven. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

And everything else you really need will be added to you. Stories told of the millionaire, the multi-millionaire who died and when his will was read the press were very interested to know how much he'd left and who he'd left it to.

And as the family came out from the reading of the will one of the press men said, so how much did your old man leave to the eldest son? And the eldest son replied, all of it.

That is true, isn't it? Didn't mean he'd left it all to him but he'd left it all. So let's get our priorities right. God may bless us in many, many ways.

Well let's use those blessings for the gospel. We are in the wealthiest part of the world. You may not feel wealthy but in world terms every one of us here tonight is very wealthy. Are we using our wealth for the gospel?

[19 : 30] Do we want to get the gospel out into the developing world for example? What about your home? Are you using it for the gospel? What about your time, your energy, your gifts, your skills?

Settle your priority. Don't be half-hearted as a Christian. Live for Christ and the gospel. Be an active participant in God's work in the world.

It's so exciting. It's such a great way to live because then you share in its blessings as you see people coming to faith in Jesus all around the world.

And so much can be done for so little. I'm interested in work in Sierra Leone in West Africa. One of our ex-students is establishing a radio ministry there and he's broadcasting half-hour programs of gospel ministry throughout Sierra Leone which has been ravaged by war for the last ten years.

Do you know how much it costs for one half hour of gospel ministry in Sierra Leone? £28. To broadcast a gospel program throughout the nation.

[20 : 34] I don't know what it would cost in England probably £2,800. Amazing what our wealth can do in other contexts when we settle our priorities.

Don't miss out on it. Don't say it's extremist. It's normal Christianity. Live for Christ and the gospel. Second thing I want to say is this. Pursue your purpose.

Settle your priority. Pursue your purpose. Have a look at verse 19. For though I am free from all I have made myself a servant to all that I might win more.

Now I want to appeal to the young people here tonight especially. If you're a Christian and you believe the gospel is true then is it not supremely worth living for Jesus?

In the light of eternity time is very short. As you get older you find it goes faster and faster. Our culture is very passive and laid back these days and that's not very helpful for our Christian lives.

[21 : 36] It's not cool to be too keen. So we tend to drift on never really pursuing our purpose. Never really seeking to live all out for Jesus. And life sort of happens to us but we don't pursue God's plan for us.

See for Paul it meant in verse 19 Though I am free from all I have made myself a servant to all so that I might win more. He used his freedom as a Christian to deny himself wherever the gospel was at stake.

And the way he lived was anything I can do to win people to Jesus I'm going to do it. Now let me challenge you and myself tonight. Is that what we're doing?

He accommodated himself he says to different cultures and to different ways of life. There were the Jews in verse 20 there were the Gentiles in verse 21 there were the weak or the scrupulous people in verse 22 and what he says is I never for one moment compromise my message but I do everything I can to build bridges to people to love them and to involve myself with them.

So when I'm with the Jews he says I don't raise their hackles unnecessarily I don't want to cause them to stumble I'll go to their synagogue I'll teach them from the Old Testament I'll even have my Gentile friend Timothy circumcised if that will help people to listen to the gospel.

[23 : 05] And when he went to the Gentiles well he used a different approach he was prepared to use Gentile thought forms and Gentile thinkers and to show them how the gospel impacted their way of living.

and when he was with the weak or the scrupulous people who were perhaps very detailed in what they would accept and wouldn't accept he did nothing to offend them unnecessarily.

For him Christ and the gospel were far more important than these cultural distinctives. And where the gospel wasn't compromised Paul was prepared to make all sorts of other concessions.

Verse 22 I've become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. Now that ought to be the heartbeat of our church. We are here for the gospel to reach out to this great city with people from all over the world here in Glasgow.

What an enormous opportunity it is. But it won't happen if we don't pursue our purpose. And that's always the way for real gospel people. Our problem is that too often we get lost in our own subcultural norms more than we love lost people.

[24 : 15] Some of you will know the name of Hudson Taylor a great missionary to China in the early days of Christian work there in the 19th century. He went out from England and he assimilated himself to the Chinese culture.

He grew his hair long he had it made into a pigtail he wore Chinese clothes to get alongside Chinese people. And what happened? Well the sending churches in England said oh dear he's gone native.

We can't trust him any longer. He seems to have gone overboard. There was all sorts of criticism of him. Because their culture mattered more to them in Victorian England than the souls of Chinese people being saved.

It's very easy to fall into that. I could take you to Christian churches tonight where the version of the Bible that is used is the most important thing that people think should be preserved there even if people can't understand it because the particular language of that version is so old fashioned.

What does that mean? It means we don't have a heart for lost people. We can appreciate the old version of the Bible. I love the authorised version I was raised on it. But I know that most of the young people out there in the street aren't going to understand it at all.

[25 : 29] I want them to hear the word of God in a way that makes sense to them. Because we want them to be saved. See we've got to be prepared to break through our comfort barriers.

When I was pastor of the church in Southampton we discovered that 8 o'clock on Sunday night would be a good time to do evangelism. There were no parties on Sundays. Fridays and Saturdays were party nights for non-Christian young people.

So we put on something on Sunday night which we wanted to call not the 8 o'clock service. It was the time we had not the 9 o'clock news. So we had not the 8 o'clock service. It wasn't a service. It was an hour's presentation of gospel truth with upfront music and interviews and a very clear biblical gospel talk. And I remember talking to my elders about this and saying can we try this? And one of them immediately said but what about my Sunday tea? Because you see if we're going to go to 8 o'clock on Sunday night to try and reach those who are not yet Christians well we'll have to move the 6.30 service to 5.30 and that will interfere with my tea time.

[26 : 31] And then poor man he realised what he'd said and I always remember his great apology and his great sense of oh dear I shouldn't have thought like that. But we do think like that. We're not going to reach this generation of unchurched people unless we pursue our purpose.

Unless we do everything we can to get the gospel to them I've become all things to all people that by all means I might save some.

Now friends I'm not talking about the disposal the disposable packaging of our traditions I'm not saying that those things don't matter of course not but what I'm saying is it is sometimes more disposable than we think and we've got to find all sorts of new ways of getting the gospel out of the building and into the minds and the hearts of the people around us and we'll never do that unless we love Christ and the gospel more than we love our subculture and our traditions.

When I worked in the student ministry I remember a very telling example of this. I was running a student mission for overseas students and we had a Japanese girl who was on the team as a Christian and she gave her testimony at the mission.

She said she'd come to the university in England and she'd been in one of the halls of residence and she'd been put providentially in the next room to a Christian girl. The Christian girl had befriended her she was new in the country the Japanese girl she knew nothing about Christianity when she arrived but the Christian girl made a friend of her showed her around the campus took her around the town spent time with her showed her love and after a few weeks she said to the Christian girl there's a book by your bed it's always there what book is it?

[28 : 21] Oh she said it's a bible oh yes I've heard about the bible it's a Christian book well said the Christian girl would you like to read it with me? Yes she said I would well she said I read it every night at ten o'clock why don't you come into my room every evening and we'll read the bible together now look at how she is putting herself out she's free from war but she's made herself a servant to the Japanese girl that she might win her to Christ and of course she did and I always remember what the testimony said the Japanese student said you see my English friend built a bridge of friendship into my heart and over the bridge Jesus walked that's what he's calling you to do pursue your purpose whose slave are you going to be for Jesus and the gospel's sake and the third and last thing that he says is in verse 24 do you not know that in a race all the runners compete but only one receives the prize so run that you may obtain it settle your priorities pursue your purpose go for the prize there's our third point go for the prize this gospel is supremely worth living for because it's the only investment in time that yields dividends in eternity and Paul is never embarrassed to lift our eyes to the far horizon and exhort us to take the long view he writes to a Greek church which was familiar with the games of course of ancient Greece the athletics of the Olympics and so on and he says look be like one of those runners who desperately wants to win the prize it's always striking isn't it when the Olympics come round and they interview our British prospects and sometimes the TV reporter goes out running on the streets with them at some unearthly hour of the morning or he's in the swimming bath at 6am and they're going up and down up and down up and down and he eventually interviews the athlete and he says why do you do all this and of course they always say the same thing don't they

I want that gold medal I want to win the prize they go into strict training every athlete verse 25 exercises self-control in all things if he or she is going to win because nobody wins a gold medal without supreme dedication and discipline it's very striking it's very challenging because what they are willing to do for a medal or if you like a perishable wreath as verse 25 says that's the victor's crown that was put on their heads and which we saw in the past Olympics they followed that in

Athens didn't they they put the laurel wreath on their heads but how long did that last it's perishable it's soon forgotten but look at the end of verse 25 we do it for an imperishable an eternal reward and that is why you see we need to go for the prize because it's so easy to run aimlessly it's so easy to shadow box that's what verse 26 is saying there's a track there's a course you've got to pace yourself you build up in your training you get to the right peak for that particular event today the lady who won the 10km race today didn't do that without training

I gather it's the 6th time she's won it she knows what she's doing she's determined she's focused how few Christians are like that and so Paul says I'm not running aimlessly I'm not shadow boxing beating the air this is top priority everything that will indulge my lazy body and my undisciplined mind and make me anything less than 100% for Jesus that is what I'm going to put behind me verse 27 I discipline my body I keep it under control I'm not going to be let down in the end having preached to others by being disqualified because my life was hypocrisy words are easy but it's actions that count so I'll go through the training I'll study my bible I'll learn my faith I'll learn how to share it I'll make time to pray I'll ask God to provide me with natural friendships so that eventually I can share the gospel in a straightforward unpressured way

I'm going to live an authentic Christian life I won't hold on to my rights I'm not going to be conditioned by my culture I'm going to set my eyes on the heavenly city and the eternal realities and I'm going to run with patience the race that's set before me I've only one life it will soon be past and only what's done for Jesus will last so is that extremism or is it the only life worth living if we say we believe the gospel then the only way to share in its blessings is to dedicate our lives to the Christ who is the heart of the good news and to live all out for him if you're not yet a Christian tonight that's what being a Christian is about loving Jesus because he loved you committing yourself to follow him because he gave himself for you on the cross and if you are a Christian you know that's what it's about don't you but brothers and sisters we need to come back to it again and again

God is nobody's debtor everything I have ever given to him he has always given back to me in abundance you cannot out give God so give him your life offer your life to him in service of this Jesus one missionary who was martyred for his faith the famous Jim Elliot of the Auka Indians wrote in the 1950s just before he lost his life as a young man in his twenties he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose isn't that striking he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep that is his life to gain what he cannot lose that is God's eternal salvation he doesn't gain it by his martyrdom but in being faithful to God's call he enters into everlasting life well it's an exciting thing to be a Christian committed to Christ and the gospel it really does give you the best of all worlds and we do it all for the sake of the gospel because that way we share in its blessings joy and fulfillment beyond imagination in this life and in the world to come life everlasting this gospel this saviour is worth living for so let me encourage you tonight to take some time before you go to sleep to speak to God about it to settle your priorities now to say

[35 : 09] I'm going to live for Christ and the gospel I'm going to believe that gospel I'm going to give myself to his service pursue your purpose work out how it is God has wired you up what it is he wants you to do tomorrow at work this week at school in university at the school gate wherever it may be don't always be thinking oh if only my circumstances were different no pursue your purpose now serve the Lord in all the open doors you've got and go for the prize the prize of God's well done good and faithful servant for the great good news is this that whereas in running the athletics race only one gets the prize in God's race every faithful servant receives their reward I do it all for the sake of the gospel and here and now and then in heaven we shall certainly share in its blessings let's pray so father we ask that you will warm our hearts where they are cold that you will stir our wills where they are powerless that you will fill our minds with your truth and dispel our illusions thank you that you have shown us that there is no one else who is worth living for there is no other good news that can change our world thank you for the good news of Jesus Christ and him crucified so as we bow before you

Lord Jesus take our lives we pray whether for the first time or whether we've been following you for many years renew our commitment to you help us to settle our priorities help us to pursue your purposes for us so that we may be living our lives for you this week in all the opportunities that you will bring us and above all save us from being lukewarm and half-hearted help us to go for the prize so that our lives may count for your glory we ask for your great namesake Amen