

All Things to All People

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of September 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled All Things to All People and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 1 to 27.

And you may like to have open the passage from 1 Corinthians 9 on page 931 in the Black Bibles in the pews.

This is part of a sermon series on 1 Corinthians chapters 8 to 14 over the next few weeks. And I think you'll find it helpful to have the passage in front of you. This chapter is an unusual industrial relations dispute.

We're used to people who strike for more pay or strike to get paid. Or we hear of people who sue their employer because they don't get paid or they don't get paid what the award wages are or what they ought to be paid.

[1 : 1 3] And at first sight that's what this chapter looks like. St Paul making his claim to be paid or to be paid properly. But what makes this chapter so unusual is that at the crunch point of his argument he renounces his right to be paid.

In fact this chapter gives us one of the best snapshots of St Paul. What motivated him, what his principles and passions were. And throughout the chapter he builds up a logical argument especially in the first half and then completely and surprisingly turns it on its head in the second half.

Almost like a logical syllogism he states two premises. I am an apostle. Apostles ought to be paid. And we expect the crunching conclusion to be therefore pay me what I'm due.

But just at that point he renounces that right to be paid. And then finally and maybe even more demanding of all in this chapter.

His motivation and passion is the example that should motivate and drive us as well. Premise one is I am an apostle.

[2 : 3 6] In the first two verses. Treated fairly briefly. It seems from this letter 1 Corinthians and the letter 2 Corinthians that there were some in the church in Corinth that somehow treated Paul with disdain or despised him or rejected his authority as an apostle.

After all he worked as a tent maker and many Corinthians looked down on manual labor. Maybe some of them belittled his apostolic office.

Maybe they thought that he was second rate because he wasn't one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus or something like that. Certainly the issue of authority keeps coming up time and again in these letters.

So Paul's first point is that I am an apostle. He has in verse 1 four rhetorical questions and the way they're written each of them demands a positive answer.

Am I not free? Of course I am. Am I not an apostle? Of course I am. And then the two criteria for his apostleship.

[3 : 45] Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Of course I have. Are you not my work in the Lord? Of course you are. To be an apostle in the New Testament was not to be one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus but really to be a witness of the risen Jesus.

Somebody who saw Jesus usually in the period from the date of the resurrection until 40 days later he ascended to heaven. St. Paul's apostleship was unusual in that he saw Jesus on the road to Damascus sometime after the ascension of Jesus to heaven.

So that's the first thing he saw the risen Jesus. But the other evidence for him being an apostle, much more down to earth and practical in a sense, was the existence of the Corinthian church.

You, he says, are my work in the Lord. You are evidence that I am an apostle. Indeed, he really implies that if I'm not an apostle, then you aren't a valid Christian church.

If I'm not an apostle, he says to others in verse 2, at least I am to you because the church at Corinth was the one that Paul had planted. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

[5 : 06] Well, that's the first premise. It's treated fairly briefly and fairly straightforwardly. The second takes more argument.

Apostles, and hence Paul, ought to be paid properly. And he deals with that through verses 3 to 14.

This is my defense to those who would examine me, he says in verse 3. And now come his argument about being paid. Firstly, in verses 4 to 6, he gives three ways in which an apostle ought to be, and in fact usually was, supported.

And he agrees with those. Do we, apostles, not have the right to our food and drink? Yes, they do. That is, apostles ought to be supplied their basic daily needs for food and drink.

Secondly, do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife? Yes, we do. Not the right to be married, but the right for a believing wife to accompany an apostle on their missionary journeys, and therefore to be supported by other Christians wherever that apostle was ministering.

[6 : 20] And clearly other apostles had that right and practiced it, as the end of verse 5 implies. Indeed, some of the brothers of Jesus himself, that is, Jesus' own brothers, children of Mary and Joseph, born after Jesus, of course, and who became Christians, and then apostles having seen the risen Jesus, and involved in Christian ministry.

And Kephas, another name for Peter, is mentioned as well. The third right of an apostle that was generally practiced by other apostles was that they did not have to work in some other work in order to be supported financially.

Or is it only Barnabas and I, Paul says, who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Barnabas, we don't think, ever went to Corinth, but clearly he, like Paul, worked in some manual labor.

Paul is a tent maker, as I've said, in order to support themselves in the work of the gospel. They're the three things that apostles deserve, if you like.

And Paul is saying, if those rights apply to other apostles, then they ought to apply to me as well. Why should I, Paul, have to work at making tents?

[7 : 39] He then goes on to give four reasons why apostles, including himself, should be paid. The first reason, in verse 7, uses an analogy from secular work.

If the soldier gets paid for his work, if the planter of the vine gets paid for his work, if the shepherd gets paid for his work, in part, out of the work they do, so then ought to an apostle.

He's using an analogy from the secular workforce. They all get paid from the fruit of their labor. Why not an apostle? Then in verse 8, the second reason or argument.

Now, not a secular analogy, but rather an Old Testament law. Do I say this on human authority? No.

Does not the law also say the same? Yes, is the implied answer. And then he gives the quote from Deuteronomy 25. It's a surprising quote. And we may wonder, well, how does this support his argument?

[8 : 49] You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain. Now, what on earth has an ox got to do with an apostle's ministry?

The law said that the ox, when it is trampling out the grain as part of the process for harvest, ought not be muzzled. That is, it ought to be able to be free to eat of the grain as it does its work.

The ox, you see, would be supported by the fruit of its own labor. But in the Old Testament, the laws often function as models or paradigms.

I mean, you ought not, if you were an ancient Israelite, to think, well, an ox couldn't be muzzled. I might as well get a donkey because then I could muzzle it and therefore it wouldn't eat so much of my grain. Whether it was an ox or a donkey or a cow or a cat, in a sense, it's a paradigm.

It's a model, you see. And Paul is appropriating that beyond animals to people. If an ox could eat of its own labor and be supported thereby, so too an apostle.

[9 : 59] It might look a strange law at first, but Paul is in fact extending the model sense of the law to include himself and human beings. He makes that clear, I think, in verse 10.

Paul then applies it to his work in Corinth.

He has sown spiritually in Corinth. That is, he's planted a church. Now the church has grown. He says, I ought to be able to receive material benefits from the labor of my sowing.

Verse 11. If we have sown spiritual good among you. And then literally the next expression is, it's no big deal if we reap your material benefits.

If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more? Because after all, Paul has been the one who has planted this church. That's the second argument.

[11 : 09] The third uses another analogy, but this time from the Old Testament, not the secular workforce. And from Old Testament religious service. Verse 13.

Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple? And those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar. Now the laws in the Old Testament for the priests who work at the temple or the tabernacle and the altar, there were parts of sacrifices that they were entitled to.

It was the means by which priests could eat and live and be supported. Paul is extending that from the Old Testament as an analogy for himself in the New Testament as a gospel minister.

Part of what is offered by the people of God ought to be in the support of Christian gospel ministry, is what he's saying here. It doesn't just apply to secular workforce, but even to the religious workforce.

Hence to apostles as well. But then the clinching argument in verse 14. Jesus' command. In the same way the Lord, that is Jesus, commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

[12 : 24] Referring to words in Luke 10 for example where Jesus sent out the disciples and he said to them, The context of Jesus' words are the same context here.

Gospel ministers, apostles, ought to be paid for their labor and from its fruits. So that's Paul's argument through those verses.

There is no doubt that apostles and Christian ministers generally ought to be paid. Their work deserves appropriate remuneration. And I think by implication what Paul is saying is that Christians have the responsibility to pay for and support Christian ministry.

But now, just at the point we expect Paul to say, so pay me, he doesn't.

He's silent. Indeed he makes it clear he's not writing this to stake his claim. Verse 15 says, I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case.

[13 : 40] It's fully Paul's right to be paid. He is an apostle. It was an apostle's right. But he will not claim it. But his lack of being paid makes him no less an apostle.

Which it seems that some Corinthians thought. If Paul's not getting paid, if he's working as a tent maker, he can't really be an apostle. He's just a second rate Christian minister.

Not true, says Paul. Now why does Paul go to such lengths to say that I don't want to be paid? I mean why go to the effort of the argument to say I'm an apostle, apostles should be paid, here are lots of arguments for why apostles should be paid, and then say but I don't want to be paid.

Why go to the effort? Because what he's trying to teach the Corinthians is what guides or drives or motivates him. And that's more important than whether or not he's paid in effect.

What is his passion? What drives Paul? What controls what he does and thinks and says? That's what he's trying to teach the Corinthians. And he says it most clearly in verse 12b.

[14 : 50] You'll notice that verse 12 at the top of the right column is split in two. And the second bit that begins the new paragraph is where he declares this. Nevertheless, he says, We have not made use of this right that is to be paid, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Paul's motivation is the gospel. Paul sees that somehow his being paid in Corinth may become a hindrance to the progress of the gospel.

He's prepared to give up that right for the sake of the progress of the gospel. Anything that hinders people becoming Christians, he will put aside and abandon for their sake.

Even if they're right things or good things, he will give them up for the sake of others. You see, for Paul, the rights of another person to hear the gospel unhindered and become a Christian are more important than his rights to be paid for the work of an apostle.

Last week we saw in chapter 8 that he wouldn't even eat any meat if it became a hindrance to another Christian growing as a Christian or someone becoming a Christian. And here the same sort of principle applies but in a different field.

[16 : 15] He gives up his right to pay just so that nobody will be hindered in becoming a Christian. He goes on to say in verses 16 and 17 that he regards himself really as a slave of Christ.

And slaves wouldn't get paid, so nor will he. What is his reward then? His reward, he says in verse 18, is that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge so as not to make full use of my rights in this gospel.

The gospel is after all God's free grace. God's gift of salvation and eternal life through Christ. It can't be given under charge.

If the gospel is free grace, it ought to be offered freely to people so that they can respond freely to it with faith and repentance.

That's what Paul is saying here. I want people to become Christians without paying for it because the gospel is grace. It's gift. It's free.

[17 : 27] So I have no right to charge people for it. Now there are some important principles here. Paul's not criticizing those who receive payment for gospel ministry.

It's their right and their due. But he is concerned for himself that if he is paid by people in Corinth and people who become Christians then it may look as though he's in it for the money.

The only reason you're preaching about this Jesus is so that you can get money out of it. And you see in the ancient world philosophers would wander around the Greek countryside preaching their philosophies but charging people to hear them.

Paul wants to make it clear he's not part of that practice. His gospel is good news that he's free. He will offer it freely to people. Now it's true that ministers ought to be paid fairly.

That's part of Paul's argument. And it's clear that at times he was supported by Christians from other places. I think it's good that in the Anglican church which has a centralised law about this that ministers have a fixed rate to be paid because in some independent churches I've heard of cases where ministers get paid a pittance or an inadequate amount to support them in their ministry.

[18 : 55] But on the other hand it ought to be very clear for any minister that they are not in it for the money and they ought not to give the appearance of being in the ministry for the money.

I remember when Billy Graham came to Sydney in 1979. The media, which was of course largely hostile made a big thing of the place of the fact that Billy Graham was staying in a fairly nice hotel in Sydney.

I can't remember what hotel it was. They seemed to be implying that Billy Graham was really in it for the money. It was a relatively exclusive hotel.

Now I have no doubt that Billy Graham is a person of integrity but it makes the point that we must not only do what is right but be seen to do what is right.

There are opportunities I think in Christian ministry to make a lot of money. Weddings and funerals and so on. The income of which I give entirely to Holy Trinity rather than to keep for myself which I think is the right practice.

[20 : 04] But also in evangelistic meetings or crusades like Billy Graham I think it's unfortunate that collections are taken. It ought to be that somebody goes to an evangelistic meeting without any reference to paying a contribution or taking up a collection or paying any money at all.

If the gospel is free then it ought to be there free. The church I was at in England before coming here had a practice that had a lot to commend it.

The treasure is about to have fits when I say this. But they didn't take up a collection. They had a bowl in the foyer and people put their money into it on the way in.

And the reason they had that practice was that they didn't want any visitor or non-Christian to come and feel that they were being asked for money. I'm not saying that we should adopt that practice.

I'm just offering it as an alternative to what we do. And no doubt the vestry will reject my words with some wisdom at some point. But the point you see is that when we offer the gospel to people we should do it in a way that is complete takes away every possible hindrance or obstacle to then becoming a Christian.

[21 : 26] Now these principles have largely been to do with ministers and ministry. But they're the sort of principles that also apply to every Christian. What in your life is a hindrance to somebody else becoming a Christian?

Your bad family relationships. Your friends may be thinking why would I want to be a Christian when here my Christian friends they're always fighting with each other.

Their family life isn't really a model that I would like to aspire to. Or every time the church contacts me it's always about money. You hear that said where people have no contact with the church but somehow they're on an ancient list.

And every 20 years there's a stewardship campaign and that's the time when the church knocks at their door. Well I've tried to be very careful that we don't do that here. So that we do visit people in the parish who are on all these ancient lists but we don't ask them for money.

We extend to them the gospel. I have some qualms with some of the ancient buildings in England the cathedrals charging admission for people to look over them.

[22 : 39] In part I think well fair enough the buildings have got to be supported but then I think well what is this actually saying about the gospel here? Is the church always wanting money?

There are a whole host of other things in our lives that I'm sure are hindrances or obstacles to our friends becoming Christians.

They're probably good things that we're doing but Paul is saying even his rights he will put aside so that there is no hindrance to anyone becoming a Christian.

He sums up that principle in the next paragraph verses 19 to 23. Let me read verse 20 for example. To the Jews he says I become as a Jew.

That is I act in a kosher way. If I'm going to minister to Jews the gospel of Jesus Christ I don't want to put up a barrier that's secondary. So I'll accept their feasts.

[23 : 40] I'll eat the kosher food. I'll be circumcised and get my compatriots circumcised if I'm working in a Jewish community so to speak.

So that there's no other barrier that will prevent them from hearing the gospel. But in verse 21 he says when I go to the Gentiles that is the non-Jews or those outside the Old Testament law I don't want them to think they've got to eat kosher food or accept Jewish festivals or be circumcised or anything else.

They become barriers to those people. So I'll put them aside. That is I'll act in one way to the Jews and in another way to the Gentiles. And when it comes to weak people he says in verse 22 I become as one weak.

Which I think refers back to last week's argument that I won't eat meat if somehow it defiles a weak person's conscience. That is I will take away anything that is a barrier to each person or person group.

And when we hear somebody say I will be all things to all people we often don't see it in the context that Paul meant it. He says at the end of verse 22 I have become all things to all people.

[24 : 54] Why? Not because I'm fickle. Not because I'm a person lacking integrity. Not because I'm an ancient post-modern who'll do whatever it means for some other person.

It doesn't really matter. All things are relative. I will be all things to all people he says that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel.

Paul recognises you see that the gospel itself of God's grace in Jesus Christ is unchanging. It's essential. But the other paraphernalia the way it's done the lives that we live around it some of those things may well be good but they're secondary issues.

Paul you see can identify what is the primary gospel from the secondary baggage in which it's often presented. The gospel's primary other things are secondary.

The gospel's non-negotiable the secondary things are non-essential. We can sit loose to the latter for the sake of the former. When Hudson Taylor went to as a missionary to China I think I've got the right person in place he wore Chinese clothes which some people thought was a novel idea of missionary work.

[26 : 15] But what he was trying to do was take away the possible hindrance or barrier that western clothing and habits might be so that he could identify with the Chinese in a way that would take away any possible obstacle to them hearing and responding with faith to the gospel.

What about us? What about the way our church operates? What are some of the traditions or ways we do things that may actually hinder non-Christian people from hearing the gospel?

Cold pews or buildings. Some sort of ceremony or liturgy that may be foreign to some people. Maybe the clothes we wear or the way we speak.

The music we sing. Or the robes that ministers wear. Who knows? But if there is some secondary hindrance to people becoming Christians we ought to be prepared to put it aside whatever it is so that we may win many for Christ.

Well in 50 weeks the Olympics begin. some of us have already got our tickets booked. Already more importantly the athletes are training.

[27 : 32] A rigorous regime of diet and exercise. A strict self-discipline of denying themselves chocolate cake for at least a year. But when next September you see Cathy Freeman break the tape first in the 400 metres or when you see Ian Thorpe stand atop the victory dais for his third or fourth gold medal.

Or when at last we see Australia's men's hockey team win gold at Olympic Games. And when we hear Advance Australia Fair echo around the Homebush Stadium then think that should be me.

That should be me. not standing on a victory dais being given gold silver or bronze a stuffed toy and flowers. But that should be me receiving God's crown of eternal glory.

And between now and then every time you see an athlete in training or read about one in the paper or see it on the news think that should be me. Not running around the block but running the gospel race for God.

That's the analogy that Paul uses to finish this chapter. In Corinth in the ancient world every three years they had the Isthmian Games second only in importance to the ancient Olympics.

[29 : 03] Paul uses the athlete as the analogy for how every Christian should live not just him as an apostle not just Christian ministers but every single Christian.

Is this you? Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.

Athletes exercise self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath but we an imperishable one.

so I do not run aimlessly he says nor do I box as though beating the air but I punish my body and enslave it so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

When Paul cedes his rights for payment in Corinth he exercises not only his self-control but also he looks forward to a greater reward the heavenly and imperishable wreath that God has for his people.

[30 : 18] Paul's model of passionate purposeful focused deliberate self-denying Christianity is a model for each and every one of us.

Does that description of the athlete spiritually describe you? Does it put you to shame? Does it inspire you to go for gospel gold?

Run the Christian race he says. Run the Christian race in such a way that you may win the imperishable prize.