

## **For the Sake of the Gospel**

### **1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

When I was a teenager, I didn't like it because I felt that I didn't have any freedom. Unlike the United States, The South Korean education system is very competitive. I had to go to school 6 days a week. Right after school, I had to go to a martial art training center every day. My father was a pastor and I don't know why a pastor wanted his son to learn martial arts but he sent me to learn martial arts from the time I was six years old. I have black belts in three different martial arts. After martial arts training, I came back home and had to do my homework. I had almost the same schedule every day so I felt that I did not have any freedom. I wanted to be an adult so I could be free from all these mandatory obligations and do what I wanted to do. I don't know how Cam and Samantha think of their teenage life. I bet you sometimes have a similar feeling that I had when I was your age. As youth, you have to follow your parents' words and teacher's instruction. You are not even free to travel... you would need "Permission To Travel Letters" from your parents. You may sometimes feel that you are not really free yet and you want freedom!! (by the way, I am not instigating our good youth to be rebellious. Be good kids!)

Freedom is important. Freedom is the bedrock of this nation and a basic human right for all people. You have probably seen the phrase, "Live Free or Die" on New Hampshire's license plates. Literally, the forefathers of this nation fought and died for our freedom. If anyone wanted to throw away this precious and hard-earned right of freedom, what would you say to them?

### **I make myself a Slave to All People.**

Apostle Paul says "Although I'm free from all people, I make myself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them." It sounds like he threw away one of the most important basic human rights, freedom. But what caught my attention in Paul's words is that he claimed himself "free from all people" before he said, "I make myself a slave to all people." Is there such a person who is free from all people?

I know that Paul was single so he must have been free from the universal rule, "happy wife, happy life." But other than that, he might have had many other obligations. As a member of a household, Paul must have had family obligations.

As a Jew, he was obligated to keep Jewish laws and Paul was very good at it. By strictly keeping Jewish laws, Paul might have wished to be recognized as a pious man in the eyes of his people. As a Pharisee, he was bound to Jewish nationalism and very possibly, he was xenophobic. He would have avoided any contact with unclean Gentiles. He himself was so committed to Judaism that he was blind to his religious prejudices toward Christians. He was so angry with Christians he willingly traveled long distances to persecute them. Was he really a free-man? Was Paul really a free-man? Some say, “No one is more enslaved than a slave who doesn't think they're enslaved.” Paul was enslaved by the things he earnestly sought after... but he did not realize that he was enslaved by them.

But when Paul met Christ on the road to Damascus... when a dazzling divine light penetrated his soul... his blind eyes were opened to see his enslavement. As he experienced the grace of the living Christ first hand... as he listened to the gospel, the living voice of Christ... he was set free from all bondages. He let go of his religious pride. He let go of desire to be recognized. He let go of his anger toward the Gentiles. He let go of his anxiety for success. He let go of his obsession to make things right. He let go of his old judgements and opinions towards other people. He let go of his regret, guilt and fear. He let them go and let God lead his life. That made him free from all people. He was so free that he was even willing to make himself a slave to all people for the sake of the gospel.

### **Freedom from “Letting Go”**

True freedom first comes from “letting go” and letting God lead. When I was first accepted to Boston University School of Theology for my doctoral study, I was very excited. But, at the same time, I was anxious about moving to a new city that is notorious for insanely high rent. I had already received a full-time job offer from a church that I had served... and if I stayed at Atlanta, it seemed that my life would be much more stable and comfortable than my life in Boston. I knew that God was leading me in a new direction, but I hesitated to follow God because of feared an uncertain future. I didn't want to let go of my relatively stable life in Atlanta. As I talked with my wife, Juhee and reflected upon our situation for a week, God helped me see that my sense of stability and security itself was an illusion.

As you may know, I like traveling and so the travel channel was my favorite TV channel. One day, I happened to see a beautiful river in the Canadian Rocky Mountain. But what really caught my attention were some logs floating on that river as they moved toward a torrent. I don't know why, but this imagery captured my attentions and somehow God helped me to recognize my illusion of security staying in Atlanta through this image. As I watched the logs floating on that river, I felt that I was in that river holding onto a floating log that gave me relatively stable ground. But it still moved with the current so I needed to get out of the river. Since I can't swim well, I didn't want to let go. But then, someone on the riverbank shouted out, "Hey, there is another log near you. You should take that log to get closer to the riverbank. Then, I will pull you out." But I didn't want to let go my log. I worried that I might not make it to the other log and even if I did, was I sure the log would be stable enough to hold my weight. That was what I was really doing. Even if I stayed in Atlanta, I could not stay at that church forever. Eventually, I would have to move to other churches anyway. When that time came, I would have to let go and move on. My sense of stability itself was an illusion.

I, then, tried to let go of my anxiety and fear, and put my trust on God. After 7 years of living in Massachusetts, here I am now, with a wonderful church family at Asbury UMC. Of course, I still struggle to let go of my fears and desires to control my life. But, it is true that the more we trust and the more we let God lead, the more we become free from things that enslave us. And the more God leads our lives, the more we are able to live for the sake of the gospel as Paul did.

### **The freedom is essentially love**

God's grace and love made Paul free from all his false desires, obsessions, pride, guilt and fear. As he became free, Paul made himself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them. Because of his life-saving experience of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he wanted other people to meet Jesus and listen to the gospel so that they too could also live as free people. That became his own life's-purpose.

We are people who have already tasted this freedom. Aren't we? We probably don't need good bait to lure people back to the church. We just need to share God's grace and love that free us from all bondages. I mean all bondages.

It has been a month that I have been a member of Asbury and I am supposed to know all your names. Since July 1<sup>st</sup>, I have tried to memorize your names. Do you know how I memorize your names? I try to memorize where you sit and then

match your names to that spot. I don't know why but people always sit in the same seats. I bet Carl has been sitting in the same seat for more than 50 years! We feel more comfortable when everything is in the same order and the same routine. But a routinized worship service can also be a bondage. We don't want to change it and we don't want to be changed.

“There was a pastor who had worked at a small rural church for many years. During his time there, he had requested from the congregation numerous times the possibility of moving the piano from one side of the platform to the other. Each time his request was met with great resistance. The overwhelming response was always NO! so he was never able to move the piano. After he retired he came back to visit the church 5 years later and he noticed that the piano was on the opposite side of the platform. He was perplexed and wondered how the congregation ever gave permission to move the piano. So he asked the current pastor “How did you ever get their permission to move the piano?? I tried for years and they always resisted!” The pastor replied: “I never asked, I just moved it one inch everyday until it ended up on the other side of the platform!”<sup>1</sup> Sometimes change can be difficult because we are so used to our own way of worship service. But we also need to be freed from that bondage.

We are free but as Paul became a servant to all, we are called to be servants to all. To religious and non-religious, to meticulous moralists and loose-living immoralist, the defeated, the demoralized, whoever! As water changes its shape in accordance with the shapes of cups and bowls, Paul changed himself in accordance with people he met. He didn't impose his point of view on other people. Rather, he entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. He became about every sort of servant and he led them to the way of life.

I know that we are looking for a way of church revitalization and effective ways to bring people back to the church. If our intention is to bring people back to the church and make them like us, we will never be able to do that. We first need to be servants to all and enter into the life of people. We have to meet them in their life contexts, learn their struggles and the shackles that bind them. Then, we can share the gospel that truly liberates them from their bondage.

So let us change our question. Don't think of how we can bring people back to the church. Rather, let us think of how we can be changed for people outside of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reconciledworld.org/change-1-inch-at-a-time/>

the church. As a servant to our neighbors in Warwick, what does our church need to be changed? During the week, please think of one way that our church needs to change for our neighbors and share it with me.

Paul made himself a slave to all to reach a wide range of people. He became like them but he never lost his purpose, leading them into a God-saved life. Because he did not lose his central purpose, he was able to lead many people to Christ.

If you want to taste freedom, let go of your control over your lives and let God lead your lives. If you have already tasted spiritual freedom and the joy of salvation in Jesus Christ, then go out to your neighbor, whomever they are, and share your joy and freedom. As free people who are free from all but are able to make ourselves slaves for all... live as the free people of God. That is who we are in Christ. Amen.