

The Death of Me- Open Eyes pt3

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Open Eyes / 1 Corinthians 9:15–23

So last week we talked about one aspect of the missionary mindset- how we act in our churches and our culture. This week we have another facet of that mindset to tackle. And this one is no less difficult or counter cultural, but it is less evident given our current culture. In fact, in the last 2 decades it has practically become a national past time. I am talking about the American value of self centeredness.

With the rise of the internet and the proliferation of ways to document anything and everything about our days, our culture has become more and more fixated on how we are viewed as individuals and how we can make ourselves more visible and valued in the culture at large. I want to remind you it has not always been this way (old Criminal Minds episode) and social media and the internet themselves are value neutral- like most tools it is what we DO with them that make them good or evil.

But that still begs the question, as followers of Jesus, and people seeking a missionary mindset, how do we live and advance the Kingdom in a culture like this one?

There have been a lot of attempts to figure that out- some that have proved to be healthy and helpful and others, well, not so much. But, one thing we have to embrace, as missionaries to our world and spheres of influence...it cannot be about us.

When we enter a culture to reach a people for the Gospel, we have to make a choice- do we spend all our time warring against the entrenched norms, or do we seek to serve the people where they are, and see them won to the Gospel first and away from unholy aspects of culture second?

To answer that, and to explore what this counter cultural mindset looks like, let's go to scripture and see what Paul advises a church in a pagan culture to do.

Turn with me to [1 Corinthians 9:15-23](#).

So to set the context, prior to verse 15 Paul is enumerating some of his basic rights. He does this several times in his letters to make a point. And each time that point is similar, **as Christians we renounce rights and privileges for the sake of the Gospel.**

Look at verse 15- Paul is not interested in his rights, he is interested in boasting...and not about himself or his position or his privilege but (in context) about his dependence on the Lord to take care of him.

1 Corinthians 3. Giving up Rights for the Sake of the Gospel (9:12b–23)

Paul's conviction to give up his rights was a settled conviction, and he wanted to be crystal clear that his intent in writing these things to the Corinthians was not in order to gain their financial support: **"And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me.**

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The construction expresses Paul's deep emotion and his ironclad commitment not to draw his living from the gospel. Garland points out the contrasting parallel between "living" from the gospel in 9:14 and Paul's statement in 9:15 that he had rather die. Garland posits that Paul is saying, **"It is better for me to die than to live off the gospel.**

There is a valuable lesson for all of us here- no matter where we have gotten in life or what we have earned or where we live or what is in our bank accounts...**God did that.** Not us. And Paul wants to boast in his dependence on the Lord because it gives God glory.

Then in verses 16-17, Paul goes to the Gospel itself. He says he has no choice but to preach the Gospel. It is what he has been called to do, to not do it would be like not breathing. And he sees the proclaiming of the Gospel in 2 very distinct ways- for some, preaching the Gospel is the full and complete calling of their lives- their life's work. It is their stewardship- what God has given them dominion and favor over. But for others, it is not that, but it is something they do in the natural course of their lives as followers of Jesus- and for that they receive a "reward" that is the pleasure of God. A jewel for their crown, per se.

And in verse 18, Paul makes an even bolder claim- he preaches "free of charge" so no one thinks he has anything to gain from the Gospel for himself.

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Paul did not preach the gospel willingly for a reward. If he had a choice in the matter and chose to do it willingly, then he might merit a reward. Rather, **Paul understood his calling as a stewardship that required faithfulness** (9:17; cf. 4:1–5). This does not mean that Paul preached unwillingly, only that he wants to express in the clearest way possible the divine mandate that compelled him in ministry. His reward in preaching was to give up his rights inherent in the gospel and to preach without charge.

And that is the pivot, and the aspect of this missionary mindset we need to hit on today. **We share the Gospel, not so society can be better, or crime can go down, or people will be nicer. No we share the Gospel, because we cannot help BUT share the Gospel, as people are going to hell without Jesus!** Our calling to preach the Gospel is fully and completely selfless. We are not seeking gain for ourselves, we are seeking souls!

And with that, Paul is OFF on his full denunciation of self centeredness in the lives of missionaries, in the church.

Look at verse 19- Paul, the apostle, the guy who writes the letters, the last one to see the risen Jesus...he says "I am a servant." He is last.

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for Paul, the very nature of the gospel obliged him to all men in other ways in order to gain as many as possible for the gospel. **To this end Paul enslaved himself to all, and in this way he imitated Christ, who came to serve and to give his life for others**

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Just as God's folly, the cross, is the power of God unto salvation (1:18) so also is Paul's enslavement to different classes of men the best possible means for gaining others for Christ.

Church, in a culture where everyone wants to be first, volunteering to be last is revolutionary. You want to earn a hearing for the Gospel with your friends, neighbors, co-workers, family members? Stop trying to assert your rights and authority. Be last.

Now go to the next verses 20-22a

These are more complicated because the overreaches are real.

Some would read these verses as saying in order to reach people we have to embrace everything they embrace and baptize it as righteous in the name of Jesus. But if you look at the total Pauline corpus, that isn't possible as a meaning. For example, in saying "to the Jews I became as a Jew" to take that to the overreach end would imply that Jewish law codes should be incorporated into Christianity. Yet Paul condemns that over and over again.

We see that in our Christian world today in all kinds of ways. People who see marginalized groups who need the Gospel, and in the name of reaching them, they make a mess of what God has actually said about holiness and repentance. It is called syncretism (remember the church in Pergamum?) and it is actually condemned by God. It hurts the Kingdom because it tells people they have no sin in their lives- which all of us do!

So what is Paul saying?

We surrender our rights to being "offended" or inconvenienced and we stop expecting people to come to us. We go and meet them where they are!

That means starting to share the Gospel with where people are, connecting it to their current position and circumstances, rather than expecting them to come to our places.

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Garland suggests that the best commentary on Paul's becoming as a Jew and one under the law is found in 2 Cor 11:24, where Paul describes his submission to synagogue discipline five times. In other words, Paul submitted to the discipline of the community in order to maintain connections and to keep open opportunities for preaching in the synagogue

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he became like a Gentile by giving up any reliance on heritage or the law for salvation

A perfect example of that is the work we are doing with Feed His Sheep. We don't say to our homeless friends downtown, y'all roll over to Yukon, we will have a big meal for you. We go and meet them in their world. And we do not expect them to conform to our standards. Y'all need to be dressed nice and be sure to use deodorant before you come. And we do not expect our homeless friends to conform to our standards of how we act and talk. The list could go on...in short, come as you are and we will come where you are.

Think about the implications of that in our cultural moment.

- It means we need to KNOW our culture- even the parts that make us uncomfortable.
- It means we need to be respectful of people's differences- even when we think those differences are not in line with scripture.
- It means we need to recognize the issues people face- even if we do not consider them fully real.
- We have to meet people where they are in order for them to hear the message everyone needs to hear!

Which is Paul's point in vs 22b.

We meet people where they are, give up our rights, understand their perspective, so they can hear the Gospel and be saved from their sins.

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To become all things to all people does not entail the abandonment of lawfulness toward God, nor does it abandon faithfulness to the essential content or character of the gospel, which is especially taken up in the category of the "weak." It is noteworthy that Paul switches to the perfect tense, "I have become," when the previous examples use the aorist, "I became." **"I have become" expresses more of the settled conviction/manner of life that Paul had taken up for the cause of winning the most people possible to Christ**

Church this is the tightrope we walk in our time, in the same way Paul walked it in his time. And it is why we need a church community around us to walk it. Because we need the correction both ways- when we are too self centered and when we are too syncretistic.

Some would say, this is too hard and complicated! And I would respond, as would Paul, your comfort or the Gospel? Choose.

Church this is why, for a missionary mindset, self centeredness has to die! Because when it is all about us, we cannot do that!

And we have the ultimate example of that in Jesus. (Gospel presentation here)

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With one final use of the word “all,” which has dominated 9:19–23, Paul declares that everything he does is for the sake of the gospel. **In the final analysis it is the gospel that determines conduct**

Now look at verse 23- the last part of that verse hits hard...”that I may share with them in its blessing.”

I think we have a very hard message buried in there...**do we want to spend eternity with these people?** Paul does. And I think that is the most frightening part of what self centeredness can do to a follower of Jesus, a church, a nation. We don't see people as people who need to be saved, because we don't see them as worth saving. They are our enemies. And they deserve death for opposing us.

We may not say that out loud, but we say it in other ways. Friends, that cannot be. We should weep over that and repent, because **we cannot see people as enemies and not worthy of the Gospel, when God could have seen us that way.** We were His enemies and He died for us. Can we not see, even those who are our polar opposites, as people who Jesus died to save.

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To stand alongside the Jew, the Gentile, the socially dependent and vulnerable, or to live and act in solidarity with every kind of person in every kind of situation is to have a share in the nature of the gospel, i.e., to instantiate what the gospel is and how it operates.”