

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Church and the World - 1 Corinthians 9 and 10

The story is told of a rather fine, but vain, lady who was to have her photograph taken. Come the day, she spent many hours pampering herself in readiness for the photo. When she was finally ready, she went to the photographers and, in a haughty manner, said to the young man taking the photo, "Now be sure you do me justice, young man", to which the photographer quietly quipped "It's not justice you need, its mercy"!

So often we are full of ourselves and our own importance. We expect some reward for our labours, some recognition for what we have achieved. This is not only true in the secular sphere, but alas, also in the spiritual. Perhaps we have become like the woman feeling that we deserve more than we are getting. This morning we need to remind ourselves that we all need mercy, that without the Lord Jesus, we are nothing and we are unable to do anything to please Him. As believers, no matter how committed we are, we have only given Him back what He has given us, so we have nothing to boast in. We very much need to remind ourselves of the Lord's own words in Matthew 18, when He told His disciples that they needed to become like a little child. Only when we do this are we truly able to serve effectively.

As we continue our study of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, this morning we will see practically what it means to become like a child, whilst acting in a profoundly mature way. Last week we saw that one of the problems troubling the believers at Corinth was the issue of personal liberty in practice. In particular, the matter of what food could be eaten was causing a real spiritual difficulty. Paul does not duck the problem but attempts to solve it by showing by example what was required of each and every believer. We are going to look at the two chapters under the headings of

- a pattern,
- a principle,
- a purpose; and finally
- a practice.

A pattern

First of all, then, let us look at the pattern. At first glance it may seem that Paul leaves off the subject of chapter 8 to introduce a new subject. This is not at all the case. Let us read together verses 14 and 15 which sum up Paul's argument: "Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void." At the start of the chapter Paul has defended his apostleship. The fact that he had not claimed a salary from the Christians at Corinth was in no way due to the fact that he felt himself to be less of an apostle than Peter, or any of the others.

Nor was it because he did not have the right to do so. By quoting from Deuteronomy 25:4, he shows that adequate provision had been made even in the law for those involved in service. God was not only interested in the oxen that trampled the grain, but clearly intended that those whose whole lives were given over to His service should be supported by those whom they served. What Paul is showing here, then, is that although Paul and Barnabas were truly apostles and had the right to expect to be financially maintained, they had not exercised their rights so that no hindrance would deflect from the preaching of the Gospel. In verse 12, where Paul says that we "endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ", the Greek word translated 'hinder' is only used here in the whole of the New Testament. It literally means 'to dig up the road to prevent the enemy advance', a tactic widely used in France during the last war. Many religious charlatans had troubled Corinth, preaching all sorts of rubbish and claiming money for the privilege.

So Paul would wholly disassociate himself from these by living from his own means. In other places he did accept gifts, as he tells the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 11:8, but here he took no money from them. The point Paul is making is that the spiritually mature brother or sister should be prepared to forgo real and permissible things if having them is likely to spiritually stumble another believer. I wonder this morning, do you, do I, love the brother or sister for whom Christ died enough to live like this? Many activities are permissible, but if they will harm another then I must be prepared to do without. This principle would wholly have solved the difficulty over food at Corinth had they applied it to

their own circumstances. Before we move on to look at the principle that guided Paul's life, it should be noted that money was at the heart of several of the early churches' problems. It still has the potential to cause great harm today. The principles laid out in Scripture clearly show that once an individual has been called to serve the Lord with all his time, and this calling has been agreed with the local church, then that individual has every right to expect full support, financially and in all other ways from the church. It is a disgrace when the work of the Lord has to stop because of insufficient funds to carry it on, and yet we have so much. However, the individual called to serve does not necessarily receive a salary. This seems to negate the need for faith. I believe that the individual should live in faith, trusting that God will supply all needs through His people. This requires faith on the part both of the servant and of those being served, and is most likely to lead to a life lived in dependence on the Holy Spirit. But to get back to chapter 9.

A principle

Let us now look at a principle. "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more ... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake" (verses 19, 22 and 23).

Sadly, the idea of becoming all things to all men has become a bit of a nasty idea. Paul was no chameleon, changing his coat depending on whose company he was in. There was a consistent principle running through all that Paul did, although to the critic making a cursory glance, his actions may have the outward appearance of being unprincipled. So what was it that guided all that Paul did?

Wherever a situation arose that did not involve a definite point of doctrine, Paul was ready to do without things that he personally felt at liberty to indulge in, so as not to offend another. We see a practical illustration of this in Acts 16, where he has young Timothy circumcised, so as to ensure that this did not become a barrier to his teaching the Jews. He would do without eating a particular food if, by eating it, it would cause another believer to stumble. This really is at the heart of basic Christianity. How often we are so set on pleasing ourselves, sometimes even in spiritual activities that we do not care how many toes we trample on? To behave in such a manner is certainly far short of what God requires of each one of us.

Our wants and our principles are not to be maintained at spiritual cost to another. A friend at University was, in many respects a very bright Christian. However, he also had very strong political views, so much so, that many who did not share them were also not ready to listen to his spiritual input. This is exactly the point that Paul personally avoided. The overriding purpose of his life was to preach the Gospel, in its fullest sense. Anything that did not actively promote this was jettisoned as excess baggage to the athlete. Bearing this vitally important principle in mind, and with the desire that it might be lived out in our lives also.

A Purpose

Let us now go on to look at a purpose to the life of the apostle. It will be good for us to read 9:24-27 together: "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."

As you look at the known journeys of Paul, as recorded in the book of Acts, you will see that he travelled several thousand miles, much either by boat, or on foot. In 2 Corinthians 12:23-28, Paul reluctantly catalogues all the physical sufferings and emotional strain that he had endured. Here was a man whose life was consumed by a desire to be faithful to his Master. Such commitment does not happen accidentally but is learned and followed at personal cost. Just recently, Ellen MacArthur completed the fastest solo non-stop circumnavigation of the globe. For nearly three months, she deprived herself of many of the things we take for granted in modern living. For example, when was the last time I went without a proper night's sleep for 71 days? Or when was the last time I passed up on the opportunity for a little retail therapy for so long?

One can only say with profound shame that her desire to be the best is far more important to her than my desire to serve God. Her achievements, and those in the games that Paul refers to at the end of chapter 9, stand as a silent condemnation of much that passes for modern Christianity. The Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympic Games, were held every three years in Corinth. Just to be allowed to compete in the games an athlete had to show that he had adhered to a strict code of preparation. For over ten months, each athlete would have prepared just for the chance of winning the pine wreath crown.

The Greek word translated as 'compete', in verse 25, is highly descriptive. It is '*agonizomai*', from which we get the word 'agony'. Certainly after running for about two minutes I am in agony! But each athlete was prepared to do this for

many months, just for the chance of winning a perishable crown! As servants of God we are working for a far more important goal than sailing around the world or winning a race, and yet which of us can truly say that we have even started to come close to this kind of single minded commitment. Sadly, I think that by my own lack of zeal, I diminish the glory and honour of the Lord Jesus. Who would want to believe in a person that can only engender lukewarm obedience? Paul's purpose in life was very clear and overrode all other concerns that he had. He did so much for God and yet he still maintained his tentmaking trade.

There must have been times when he longed for a holiday or a long lie in for a few days. How his heart must have feared another beating as he approached a new town on his missionary journey! And yet he did not give way to his natural yearnings. In verse 27 he says that he was master of his own body. So often it is our bodies that are masters of us. He would discipline (Greek word is *'hupopiazō'*, which literally means 'to give a black eye to') his body. In a contest between his body, which told him "not another beating, can't you see the scars" and his will, which was obedient to God, his body came off a poor second, with a great black eye! As we get up this morning, and as we face the future, let us make it our aim to be wholly obedient to God, and to actively look for more ways in which we can serve God.

I recently heard about a Bible Society who had had an urgent request for a large supply of Bibles. Because the order was for so many, it was investigated to ensure that they were to be used properly. After enquiry, it turned out that the old gentleman who was requesting the Bibles really was able to give so many away. Again he asked for the Bibles, and stressed the need for them immediately. The society could not understand the rush, until it transpired that the man had been diagnosed with a terminal disease, and had only six months to live. Here was an individual, who like Paul, could truly say "for me to live is Christ".

Before we leave the chapter, it is necessary to comment on the last five words "I myself should become disqualified". Some have taught that this indicates that it is possible to lose ones salvation. Such teaching is absolutely untrue. Time does not allow this morning to go further, save to say that to teach thus is to deny the whole nature of the work of Christ. This verse teaches nothing of the sort. Some see this merely as Paul acknowledging the possibility of a loss of reward for service, due to a lack of continuing with Christ.

This is, of course, possible. However, taken with what follows, it seems more likely that Paul is embodying, in himself, a problem that he thinks his detractors faced at Corinth. He has used such a literary device before, with himself and Apollos, in chapter 3. He is courteously saying to those at Corinth who were attacking him, that he rather doubted their salvation. Yes, they behaved as part of the Christian company, but their behaviour suggested that there was no inward reality to their faith. As such they were in very real danger spiritually.

He then backs up this argument in chapter 10 with an appeal to Israel's history during their time in the wilderness. For sure, there were many who left Egypt, but there were only two of adult age who entered the Promised Land. All the others perished, due to a lack of genuine faith. So Paul arrives at the solemn warning in verse 12, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall". Dear listener, it is simply not enough to go to church, to sing the hymns, to pray the prayers and to be found in the company of Christians. God looks at the heart, and what counts with Him is real faith in the Son of God who died to take away the punishment of our sins. Nothing else will do!

A Practice

Finally, let us look at the practice of our Christianity. Paul is not primarily considering the believer's place at the Lord's Supper in the rest of this chapter. That will come in chapter 11. No, here he clearly places all believers in the one body. Each and every Christian is a part of the one body of Christ, with Him alone as the Head. No other Christian body exists. We are either in or out. This unity of the body is exemplified by the one loaf and the one cup used as we remember Him at the Lord's Supper. Now this fact puts us in a most blessed position but, at the same time, in a position of immense responsibility. We are livingly linked to Him, and to each other. Therefore what I do has an effect upon every other member of the body. Imagine that I have a great blister upon my toe. Well, my head feels the discomfort, but as it is too painful to walk on properly, so too do the rest of my legs as I try to compensate. Running becomes hard, so my lungs have to work harder etc. You see, something that affects one part, affects the whole.

So if I am living wholeheartedly for Christ, then that will have a beneficial effect on the rest of the body. My service for Christ may well see many souls saved in a part of the world I know nothing about. Conversely, my unfaithfulness will have the effect of dragging the whole body down. It really is a serious matter to belong to the body of Christ. So now Paul returns to the matter of what food is permissible to eat. Having shown that in matters of practice the real key is not to insist upon one's own rights, he teaches that all meat is acceptable.

The believer is not to go looking for trouble unnecessarily. Too thorough an inquisition into the source of the meat in the market would have probably shown that all had some tenuous link to pagan sacrifices in those days. Provided, on face value, there was no direct use of the meat in idolatry then the believer could eat with a clear conscience.

However, if another was present who had a scruple about eating, then the mature believer was to refuse the food as an expression of love for his fellow believer. Now this problem is unlikely to directly apply to us here in the U.K. today, but the same reasoning applies to all that we do. We are not to insist upon our wants, at the expense of another. We are not to go looking for reasons for causing trouble. For example, I ought not to subject every believer I meet to a rigorous cross-examination before I am prepared to have anything to do with them. If I did, then I'm sure that I would be in a church of one!

However, when a problem is clear then I am to act in love to the weaker believer so as not to stumble him. This may mean that I go without things that, under other circumstances, would be quite acceptable. To sum up these chapters then, here we get teaching on the matter of guidance as to the Lord's will for my life. It can be summed up in five simple points;

- Is it lawful?
- Is it profitable?
- Does it build me or others up?
- Is it to the glory of God?
- Is it likely to cause offence to another, or to cause them to stumble?

These are simple, practical questions that will help us determine the will of God on a day to day basis. The question is not "how can I know God's will for this situation?" but rather, "Am I willing to be guided in a particular situation?" As we close this morning, it would be good if we could all, with a true and full heart, echo the words of Mrs. AA Whiddington's searching hymn:

*"Not I, but Christ, be honoured, loved, exalted;
Not I, but Christ, be seen, be known, be heard;
Not I, but Christ, in every look and action;
Not I, but Christ, in every thought and word."*

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