

“Being All Things”

Reading: Psalm 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

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One of the questions that I have always struggled with in my own walk with God is to what degree my own personality and preferences ought to be changed by Christ. And by that I'm not talking about the fruit of the Spirit stuff; obviously as I draw nearer to Jesus I ought to be becoming more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, and so on. I absolutely should become more Christlike through and through. But to what degree should that turn me into someone other than who I am? I am by nature a generally quiet, introverted person who's just as happy to read a book or watch a movie as I am to go out and be with lots of other people. Should I expect my walk with Christ to change that; that is, should being a good Christian mean that I must become talkative and extroverted and the life of the party so that I can make lots of friends and lead them all to the Lord? Or to what extent should my hobbies or tastes be set aside and transformed into something else?

I'm not talking about sinful activities or hobbies that interfere with my ability to proclaim the message of Christ. But how much should all believers look alike and dress alike and talk alike and act alike? Because for years I perceived a certain Christian template that I was failing to live up to because my personality didn't fit what I saw around me. And to some degree that's natural, since we humans have an inborn desire to fit in with others, at least in some settings. We are communal creatures, and so we will often take on some of the characteristics of the people around us in an effort to fit into their group. But how far does that go in our walk with Christ and our community with the church?

Exhibit A in this internal debate I've had going on for years is this passage from 1 Corinthians 9. I've often seen this passage used as an example for how we should go about building relationships with those outside the church. In that light, this is then taken to be a passage dealing with Christian mission and the sharing of our faith, on a personal level as well as from the standpoint of world missions. The Apostle Paul comes right out and says it: in whatever context he found himself, he took on the characteristics of that context for the sake of the mission. He made himself a “slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” To the Jews he became like a Jew, to those who did not observe the Jewish law, he became like one who did not observe the Jewish law, and so on.

And so there are some who take that to mean that we Christians ought to go as far as we can in adopting the characteristics of those around us as sort of a Trojan Horse tactic: maybe they'll like us enough to let us get close enough that we can spring the gospel on them and win them to Christ. On a large scale, that means we need to make things like Christian movies and Christian music that is close enough to the world's movies and music that maybe someone will see it without realizing that it's Christian, and then we can slip the gospel in there and get them. On a personal level, that means that I should be extremely outgoing and make friends with everyone and get everyone to like me so that I can witness to them. And for those of us whose personalities are such that we find that sort of thing very difficult and problematic, well, I guess we're just out of luck, or so I thought.

The first problem with this line of thinking is that it's just not healthy. We have a name for it when someone has no personality of their own and is only trying to win the approval of everyone else; it's codependency, and it's not a good thing. More than that, it's just exhausting. If that's what I

think Paul means and I also try to become “all things to all people,” I’m just going to wear myself out. But the second problem is that that’s not really what Paul was trying to say at all.

As is often the case, we can come to a better understanding of a passage of Scripture by taking a close look at what’s around it. This book of the Bible was a letter written by Paul to the church at Corinth, and that church had a lot of problems. It was a fractured church with rampant spiritual immaturity and sin, but God was still at work there and Paul was not giving up on them. But one of the problems, from what we can gather, is that at least some people in this church weren’t sure they were willing to listen to Paul’s messages or instructions. There seemed to be some question about whether Paul was truly an apostle or not, and whether he had any real authority. There was disagreement about whether food that had been offered to a pagan god was demonic in nature and therefore idolatrous to eat, and apparently some people thought Paul was being too lenient on this point.

And so when Paul writes the passage we read today, it’s in that context. He’s trying to defend his authority as an apostle of Christ, and he’s explaining to them the why behind some of his actions. The Christians in Corinth are getting hung up on external things that they apparently think are integral to faith in Christ. They think that when Paul shifts his tactics for communicating Christ, he is somehow betraying the true practice of the faith. But Paul is explaining to them that no, what he’s been doing is removing anything that is a hindrance to the proclamation of trust in Christ. They were saying, “Look at how much you’re willing to compromise, Paul; clearly you’re not a true Apostle.” Paul’s response is to point out to them how far short they’ve fallen in seeing how far the message of Christ transcends their culture.

We still struggle with these same basic problems today. We still struggle to separate trusting in Christ with all of the things that our culture has associated with trusting in Christ. We still take the values of our culture and bless them in Christ’s name and think they’re a part of Christ’s kingdom. We add partisan politics to trust in Christ, or taste in clothes or music to trust in Christ. We still struggle to separate the methods of worship that we’re familiar with from trust in Christ, and we can try to export our methods to those who do not understand or like them, and they can become a barrier. We still struggle to separate our personal preferences and personalities from trust in Christ, and we think those who do not act like what we expect must be far from Christ.

But Paul is letting the Corinthian Christians know that the gospel message is explicitly separate from the cultural expressions of the gospel. He’s reminding them that the work Jesus did opened wide the arms of the kingdom of God, inviting the nations to come and see the goodness of the Lord. The gates of the kingdom were flung open to pour out God’s grace on those who were near and those who were far away, and the message of Christ is equally applicable to all who will come. The gospel cannot be contained in a style of worship or a manner of dress or a political party or the values of a culture. Paul is cutting past all of that to share with the lost the message that wherever you are, you are not too far away from Christ.

This chapter in 1 Corinthians is one with some quotable passages in it, and in my experience they usually get chopped apart from one another and used in isolation, when in reality they make more sense together. Paul continues with another familiar passage, and the point is made clearer when we see that it’s a continuation of what he’s been saying: “Do you not know that in a race all the

runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

The prize is the goal. He’s not wasting time, he’s not running aimlessly, and he’s not being frivolous in his actions. He’s evaluating his message and his actions and making sure that what he preaches is indeed the core message of Christ. There is a two-pronged call to us today in response to Paul’s words. First, we need to examine our culture in light of the gospel to make sure that we, too, are running so that the true prize of Christ is before us. Especially in the United States, where cultural Christianity is rampant, we must be on our guard against those who would add obligations to the gospel of Christ. But the second call Paul leaves us with is a call to a certain type of mission: we are to love the people in the world around us so selflessly, that is, thinking of ourselves so little, that we are willing to be creative and generous in our concern for them and our preaching to them. That means that we must listen to them intently enough to actually hear their stories out of love for them. That means that we must be willing to go to them where they are, and meet them on their terms, and even find ourselves in uncomfortable situations, and maybe take on some criticism from those who are not so generous, “so that by all possible means we might save some.”

Benediction: Do not run aimlessly, and do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, run in such a way as to get the prize. Go in the name of Christ to share Christ.



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