

February 5, 2006

Epiphany 5

"Leaning Over Backwards to Share the Gospel"

1 CORINTHIANS 9: 16-23

But when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. ¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

"I will lean over backwards to help you." Have you ever heard someone say that to you? What a strange expression that is! "Leaning over backwards." We usually think of leaning forward to help someone. Only a good gymnast can actually lean over backwards. Off course this a popular way of saying, "I will do everything possible to help you."

In the words just read to you the Apostle Paul says that he will do everything possible to bring the message of the gospel to people who are lost eternally without it. He was willing to spend time in Corinth without receiving any financial support and help, just so he could have a better opportunity to share the message of salvation with people. You might say he was willing to lean over backwards just to get more opportunities to share the gospel.

A missionary once shared the gospel with people in Africa. One of the villagers who heard the message decided to take the message to people in the next village. The only problem was, he had elephantiasis, a disease where the legs swell up enormously with fluid. In spite of the pain and the difficulty of walking, he carried the message to the people to the next village, and then to the next village. Today we want to look at this example of Paul willing to do whatever was necessary to bring the gospel to people. It leads us to ask ourselves how we can become more devoted to sharing the gospel with the very limited time we have on this earth.

1) Making the gospel more important than money

When we look at the Apostle Paul's life we discover that having money and having things money can buy were far less important to him than sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with people who were perishing forever without him. Listen to how committed he was. "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel." Paul was committed to preaching the gospel from city to city

throughout the Roman Empire. The Lord had personally chosen Paul to be his instrument as the Lord told Ananias said in Acts 9, "This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the nation of Israel." I am holding in my hand a glove. Paul was like this glove. The hand of the Lord took hold of him, filled him and used him to spread the message of salvation. "I cannot boast. I am compelled to preach."

For Paul preaching in the city of Corinth had its special reward. He preached without receiving any monetary support from the people. "What then is my reward?" he asked. "Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not to make any use of my rights in preaching it." In the previous verses he made the case that a pastor has the right to be supported from the people he served. In Corinth Paul did not ask for support. He provided for himself and made his own living by making tents. He wanted to do this because of the super sensitive people who would have said, "Paul is just doing this to get money from us and make a living."

"It is the easiest job in the world, the job of being a minister. All you have to do is work one hour a week on Sunday morning. Then you are done for the rest of the week." I have been ribbed about that more than once in my life. The work of the pastoral ministry calls for long hours, but they are good hours. Just think. Your pastor gets paid to study for a sermon or prepare a Bible class, or visit people and bring them God's Word and spend hours in prayer. What a blessing it is to do this work full time and be supported financially by the people that you serve.

I have to admit that when I went through these verses and studied them and prepared this sermon, the thought came to me personally, "Would I preach and would I serve people with the gospel if the times change when I could not be paid for what I was doing?" I would like to think that the opportunity the Lord has given of serving in the pastoral ministry would continue, regardless of what the future might bring, even if there was no financial support for the work of the gospel.

What can we learn this morning from the example of Paul who was willing to value sharing the gospel with people above money and material things in this life? Our money is important to us, very important. With money we can buy food, pay the rent or mortgage for a home, provide clothing to cover our bodies, and put fuel into our cars. For Christians money provides a way to support the spread of the gospel here in our community and throughout the world. New Testament Christians still give their first fruits to the Lord, often using the Old Testament tithe or 10 percent as a starting point in their giving to the Lord. Every week, the first part of the money that was earned is given to the Lord for the spread of the gospel. For example, if you earn \$500 per week, you want to take a percentage of that amount and give it first to the Lord. Christians find when they put sharing the gospel first in their lives, the Lord seems to come through and provide more than enough to take care of us. Jesus said, "Where you treasure is there your heart will also be." I may even find myself saying, "It is more important to use my money for the spread of the gospel than it is to buy a large screen plasma screen from Costco." It amazes us that the Holy Spirit can lead us to make these decisions joyfully for the sake of the gospel. It helps us keep our priorities in life straight.

How important is it that you and I join Paul in bending over backwards to share the gospel

with people? Our reading from the book of Job told us how short life is. "Does not man have hard service on this earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man? Like a slave longing for the evening shadows?" Then Job goes on to say, "Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again." Life is short. For some like Job it is filled with difficulty. Yet this life is also very precious as a time to come to know how I am rescued from sin through Jesus. Life is short, yet during our brief existence here on this earth we accumulate a massive debt of sin. Our best efforts cannot even take away one small part of that debt. Romans 3 says, "That every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." I am accountable to God for the least little evil thought I had this past week. How beautiful the Gospel is presented in Romans 4 where it says, "However to the man who does not work but trust God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." God declared us righteous, forgiven, and the debt paid through the sacrifice that Jesus made.

How important is it to get the gospel out to people? Let me share a story I read this past week. Years ago in Scotland, a traveling preacher was asked to preach in a large church in Glasgow. He told the story of a mother, a Scottish Highlander, who was walking over the mountains to visit family on the other side, carrying her son with her. They were caught in a snowstorm, the temperature dropped, and the next day they found her frozen body. The little boy was still alive, tucked in a crevice in the rock and wrapped up tightly with the mother's clothes that she had used to spare his life. He used the story to illustrate the message of the gospel that Jesus sacrificed his life for us. After the service, he was given a note asking if he would visit an elderly man the next day. The man told how he had been walking by the church last night, and heard the singing, saw the lights, and heard the sermon about the mother and the little boy. He said, "I was that little boy. That was my mother who gave her life for me. But I never heard someone apply that to Jesus the way you did. Thank you for telling me how he sacrificed his life for me."

If the Lord uses troubles and disasters to provide opportunities for us to share the gospel, think of all the different ways he has planned for you to share this message. Christians not only see their money as a way to share the gospel, they see all of life as an opportunity to bring the gospel to people who are lost.

2) Making the gospel more important than personal comfort

Paul was willing to give up the privilege of being supported with money to share the gospel. He was also willing to bend over backwards to put his personal comforts aside just to build bridges to people. He talks about giving up his freedoms and becoming a slave, a voluntary slave, willing to serve all people with Christ. He said, "To the Jews I became like a Jew to win Jews." Paul could sit down with Jews and show respect and love for them by not eating a ham sandwich in their presence. He says, "To those under the law I became like one under the law." His purpose was to win those under the law to the message of salvation in Christ. To those who were not Jewish, those not under the law, he says, "I became like one not having the law, so as to win those who were under the law." If he ate with Gentiles, people not Jews, he would order a ham sandwich, just to show that he was willing to do whatever necessary to feel comfortable with them. Remember that day Paul preached to the Greeks in Athens. He did not start out talking about Jesus immediately. He began by telling these people he could see they were very religious. He showed sensitivity and a concern for where they were spiritually and used that as an

opportunity to speak about Jesus.

Lets take a closer look at what Paul says about becoming weak for the weak. This certainly applies to us. "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that all possible means I might save some. I do this all for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings." Who are the weak? Jesus certainly had compassion on the weak. It said in our gospel, "That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon possessed." The weak are not just the weak in their bodies, the sick and dying, or the people we have on our prayer chain that need healing. The weak are those who are weak in faith. They need us to bend over backwards to understand their weaknesses and find ways to help them with the gospel. The weak are those who come to worship at Star of Bethlehem, hoping to find a friendly church, not even looking for a church that preaches Christ crucified and risen every week. We bend over backwards for the weak, even praying as Jesus did into the wee hours of the morning, asking the Lord to give us wisdom on how to relate to the weak, and find a window to share the Word with them. We bear about in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ. We want the weak to see Jesus through us.

Today we begin another week on this earth. Life is short. How precious every day is as we bend over backwards in our desire to share the gospel with people. May the Lord give all of us greater peace and joy in this blessing!