



Self-Denial

1 Corinthians 9.19-27

Ken Lippold
9 December 2018

illustration: Santa Claus is Coming to Town...

Now, that song has a particular goal in mind: it's to scare children. The goal is to scare children into being obedient and good rather than disobedient and naughty. At its core, it's really a song about self-denial—deny yourself of your desires to do bad things.

We all understand that kind of self-denial, it's self-denial for self-benefit. That's why Santa Claus sometimes works as a way to manipulate children into good behaviour. If you're good, if you deny yourself of your desire to punch your sister, you'll get a present at Christmas.

And over the past few weeks we've been learning from 1 Corinthians that the nature of true Christian freedom has self-denial right at the centre.

But what has been slowly emerging is that Christian freedom isn't about self-denial for your own sake. Self-denial that only has the self as its aim isn't powerful enough to truly change you. What we've been learning is that self-denial that is truly transforming has others as the aim—as the primary beneficiary.

And so, self-denial for the sake of others is at the very core of Christian freedom. And if we're honest, this has been tough for us to swallow because our culture holds up personal freedom and personal happiness and personal identity as our highest values. And the way we're taught to live out those values in our culture is not through self-denial but through self-indulgence.

And if that's the case then it means we can be whoever we want, do whatever we want and have whatever we want as long as we're being true to ourselves and not harming anyone else in the process. Our culture tells us that self-indulgence is the way to real freedom, real happiness and the way to realise our true identity.

So, to say real freedom, real happiness and real identity comes through self-denial—not just for your own sake—but for another's sake, flies in the face of our modern culture.

But that's what Christianity claims. Christianity claims that the best way to be set free, the best way to be happy and the best way to discover your true identity is through self-denial for the sake of others.

And the Apostle Paul is going to show us how that works in 1 Corinthians 9.19-27.

He'll show us three things:

1. A Principle to Follow
2. A Picture to Motivate
3. A Prize to Run For.

1. A Principle to Follow - 19-23

Here's the principle—now we've been saying it in lots of different ways over the past few weeks—but here it is in its most reduced form: Christian freedom means self-denial for the sake of others.

And you see this principle very clearly in verse 19, take a look...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.19 - Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

Verse 19 breaks down into three parts or three clauses. One main clause and two supporting clauses. And the main clause is the one in the middle: I have made myself a slave to everyone.

The main clause is the main idea and usually the main action of a sentence. And the main idea here—the main action—is that of self-denial: I have made myself a slave to everyone.

What is it to be a slave, but to have your rights **taken** away? But in this instance, it's not that Paul had his rights **taken** away. Instead, he **gave** them away. Paul says **he** made **himself** a slave. He **willingly** gave up his rights.

So, that's the main action of the sentence: Paul's self-denial. Next I want you to see why he gave up his rights, notice the last clause in the sentence...

He chooses self-denial, in order...to win as many as possible. So far, the main action is: I choose self-denial (choose to become a slave to everyone); and the purpose of this action is:

for the sake of others (to win as many as possible).

Now, let's look at the first clause to find the foundation or the basis for the action. And what you might expect is for Paul to say something like: "because I'm obligated, I made myself a slave..." or "Because I need to make up for something I've done wrong, I made myself a slave..." But that's not what he says. Obligation, is not the basis of Paul's self-denial, it's freedom. Take another look, verse 19
Though I am free and belong to no one

And the question when you're free is always: How will I use my freedom? Well, Paul uses his freedom to become a slave. He uses his freedom to give up his rights.

And now you can see where our principle came from. 'Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.' In other words, Christian freedom means self-denial for the sake of others.

What does he mean when he says he practices self-denial to win as many as possible? Who is he winning? And what is he winning them to?

First, who is he winning? In verses 20-22 he lists 4 types of people, then at the end of verse 22 he gives a summary of who he is winning. Here's the 4 types of people:

- The Jews
- Those under the law
- Those not having the law
- The Weak

But then he sums up the whole list at the end of verse 22 when he says this:

text: 1 Corinthians 9.22b - I have become all things to all people...

So, who is Paul wanting to win? All people. He has become **all** things to **all** people. There is not a culture or a people group on earth that Paul does not want to see won.

And leads us to our next question: what is he winning them to? We get the answer in the last part of verse 22. He's winning them to salvation from their sins.

text: 1 Corinthians 9.22b,c - I have become all things to all people, so that by all possible means I might save some.

And what Paul means by "save" is what Christians have always meant by "save". It means to see people taken from death to life—to have their sins taken away and for Jesus Christ to give them his righteousness.

So, remember the principle—Christian freedom means self-denial for the sake of others. And in this passage the 'others' Paul has in mind is **anyone** from **any** culture who is not yet a Christian. And for just a minute or two I want us to reflect on how Paul exercises his self-denial on behalf of those who are not yet Christians.

To express the lengths of his self-denial on behalf of those not yet Christians, Paul uses a little formula that goes like this: To the _____, I became like a _____, to win the _____.

- In verse 20: To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.
- Also in verse 20: To those under the law, I became like one under the law, so as to win those under the law.
- Then in verse 21, it's the same formula, but now it's to the gentiles—to those not under the law.
- And finally in verse 22, it's to the weak that Paul becomes weak, in order to win the weak.

Now, what's Paul doing here? He's exercising self-denial of his own cultural identity.

illustration: involuntary loss of cultural identity..."you're from Canada aren't you."

But that's not what Paul is talking about, he's not talking about involuntary loss of cultural identity. I haven't intentionally chosen to speak differently. In fact, if anything, I've tried very hard to not lose my American accent. Paul is talking about intentional self-denial of your own cultural identity in order to share the gospel with people who are different from you.

Paul is Jewish, he was born into a Hebrew family. In another place in the Bible he confesses that he is a Hebrew of Hebrews.

So before becoming a Christian, there was nothing more central to Paul in his life than his own cultural identity. Yet, he flexes—more than

that—he denies his cultural identity in order that he might win some.

As an example, what would that look like for me to do that as an American living in Britain? What does it look like for me to give up my cultural identity to reach someone from another culture? Well, it has meant complete self-denial of the right I have to live near my own family, and to watch baseball and to speak loudly in public—well, ok, I haven't actually given that up. I'm not saying this to pat myself on the back, it's just the reality of what it takes to move to another culture. Ask anyone who has moved into another culture and they'll tell you they're practicing self-denial all the time. And some of you will be called to do that, to move to another culture in order to win people from that culture to the gospel, that call has been answered a number of times from people within our church.

What does that mean for you who are British? What does it look like to give up your cultural identity in order to reach someone from another culture? Well, it means self-denial, maybe it means denying the supremacy of the English language and learning another language to reach immigrants who have come to this country from all over the world. Or perhaps it's as simple as denying yourself of your right to Thursday nights in, and joining the iConnect team.

What does it mean for you who are middle-class? What does it look like to give up your cultural identity in order to reach someone from another class? Well, it means self-denial. Perhaps it means denying yourself the right to live in a certain neighbourhood.

What would it look like for you as an adult to join our kids ministry to help reach children?

The applications go on and on. But in every instance, in order to reach someone from another culture means self-denial of your own culture.

Now, you might be hearing this and think: this is a bridge way too far for me. Well, that's ok actually.

If you notice from the start of chapter 8 up until now, there's been a progression of how you grow to become the kind of person who will

express self-denial for someone else. It starts in chapter 8 with learning to give up—learning to sacrifice—your preferences for the sake of other Christians within the church.

And as you do that more and more, you become more and more the kind of person who when you get to the first half of chapter 9 is willing to not just give up your preferences, but you no longer demand that someone gives you your rights.

And as you do that more and more, you get here in chapter 9 and you become the kind of person who is willing to actually choose to give up your own rights—and specifically the rights that come along with your cultural identity for the sake of others.

Christian freedom a progression. It starts with preferences, then it works its way all the way into the core of your cultural identity. So, if what we're talking about now is a bridge too far, start by learning to give up your preferences. The more you do that, the more you'll become the kind of person who is willing to give up your rights.

And to help us become that kind of person, Paul gives us a picture to motivate us. That's the second point.

2. A Picture to Motivate - 24-27

And the picture is of an athlete competing to win a prize. And particularly in verse 24 it's a runner. Take a look...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.24a - Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?

illustration: A couple years ago some friends convinced me it would be a good idea to run with them in a 10K around Sefton Park. Now, you have to keep in mind, I'm not a runner, and I've never been a runner. But they convinced me it would be a good way to get motivated to do some exercise and to have some fun together as friends. So, I signed up.

And on race day I experienced exactly what this verse says. In the race, all the runners ran. And one runner got the prize—it wasn't me.

I didn't really go into the race thinking I was going to win, but I think the moment that

solidified for me that I wasn't going to win was the moment a man in a chicken costume sped past me at about the 6K mark. Not long after that Martin Gilmour passed me too. Here's what I learned that day. A Chicken is faster than Martin.

In a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize. Now, look at the second half of the verse to see Paul's point...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.24 - 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.

That's the exhortation here. In the race you're running—the race that is your life—run in such a way as to get the prize. The emphasis here is not on the prize itself, but on the way in which we run.

Now, this seems like such a shift from the previous few verses, so the question we should be asking here is: what does this have to do with Christian freedom? What does this illustration about running have to do with self-denial for the sake of others?

And the answer is: everything. It has everything to do with self-denial, because look at what Paul says next in verse 25... He starts to talk about what it looks like to train to become a champion athlete...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.25a - Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.

Now, Paul is doing something absolutely brilliant here. In order for the Corinthian church to understand the extent of self-denial it takes to win people from every culture and people group on earth, he uses the imagery of an athlete's training.

This is an image the Corinthians would have been extremely familiar with. Corinth was a sports city. Every 2 or 3 years they hosted the Isthmian Games, second in importance only to the Olympic Games. Ancient Greek culture and perhaps even more so ancient Corinthian culture was obsessed with sports.

Paul is so brilliant to use illustration of what it means to use Christian freedom to exercise

self-denial. He says if you want to know what this Christian freedom thing really looks like, look at the athletes training all around you for the games. They use their freedom to train. We could say the same today, look at the olympians, look at LFC.

Look at these athletes, they go into strict training, they exercise consistent self-denial. Why? Look at the second half of verse 25...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.25 - 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 for ever.

They do it to get a crown. This, Paul says, is how an athlete uses his or her freedom. They use their freedom to deny themselves of their rights to comfort, of their rights to eat anything they want whenever they want, to deny themselves of a nap and so on.

But their crown doesn't last. Their crown was usually some sort of garland or wreath made out of the branch of a tree. Eventually it shrivels up and dies.

But why does the Christian exercise self-denial for the sake of others? Look again at verse 25... but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. It's so that by all possible means we might save some.

The crown that will last for ever is not our own salvation, that's not what he's talking about here. The crown is the stories of all those who we've helped lead to Jesus Christ. **They** are our crown. Are you starting to see why Christian freedom means self-denial for the sake of others?

Your own self-denial of your own rights for the benefit of others means someone else's salvation! It means someone else's growth as a Christian! To the degree you exercise this kind of self-denial is the degree to which others around you will come to Christ and will grow in Christ!

This is so crucial to Paul's own life, look at how he has applied it to his own day-to-day living, verse 26...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.26 - Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.

Do you see the kind of control he displays in his own life? He says “no” to aimless running. He says “no” to shadowboxing. He’s not just wandering around in life, he’s fiercely intentional. Instead of shadowboxing, look at his own self-discipline, verse 27...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.27a - No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave...

Now, Paul is not advocating self-harm here. He’s using the imagery of boxing as an image of self-discipline: In order to become the kind of boxer who fights to win, he strikes a blow to his own body. And here’s what I think he wants us to see in regards to self-discipline...

Often the biggest problem that keeps me from running my Christian life in such a way as to get the prize, as to get the crown that will last—the biggest problem...is me. I’m the problem.

You see, running in such a way as to get the prize, by definition means sacrifice of my preferences, sacrifice of my rights, sacrifice of my own will. And if I’m honest, I don’t want to deny myself of any of those things. I want to cling to them with every fibre of my being.

But don’t you see that in doing that I strike a blow to my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who’s faith is ruined by my own self-indulgence? And in my clinging to my own cultural heritage, my silence leaves the gospel unspoken to my unbelieving family and unbelieving friends and unbelieving neighbours and colleagues.

This is a radical call to the Christian. If true Christian freedom means self-denial for the sake of others, it means a life that is more difficult to live than my non-Christian peers because it’s more self-denying, more sacrificial. It means doing things that are so full of self-denial our actions will even look strange to some of our Christian family and friends.

Now, remember the road doesn’t often start here. It starts with using your freedom to give up your preferences. Then using your freedom to learn to not demand your rights. And then finally it lands here where you become willing

to give up even your most core identity in order that you might win some.

This is hard stuff. No one ever said self-denial would be easy.

Now, if we’re going to live the kind of lives where we exercise this kind of self-denial we need a proper motivation. So, where does the motivation come from? It comes from the prize we run for. That’s our third point. Very briefly, A Prize to Run For.

3. A Prize to Run For

Paul shows us his motivation in both negative and positive terms. He shows us his motivation in negative terms at the end of verse 27...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.27 - No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave [and here’s the motivation for his extensive self-denial] so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

In other words, his motivation is the prize itself. And it’s actually in verse 23—where he puts his motivation in positive terms—that we see most clearly what the prize is that motivates us to train and run. Take a look, verse 23...

text: 1 Corinthians 9.23 - I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Now, the modern translators have tried to help us out here when they translated this for us into English, they’ve tried to make it easier for us to understand, by doing a little bit of interpretation for us. But I actually think the wording in the original language is more helpful. It literally translates as...

“I do all this for the sake of the gospel, *that I may be a participant in it.*” So, what does it mean to participate in the gospel? It means to live in such a way that it models the message of the gospel.

For Paul, to participate in the gospel means to live out the gospel. And what is the gospel?

The gospel in its core is the message about a person who so identified with others that he gave up his own rights, gave up his human preferences and his own human will in order to identify with those who he was sent here to serve. That’s the gospel message.

In fact, that is at the very core of the Christmas message. Jesus Christ came to earth and became human in order to identify completely with humanity, in order to achieve their salvation. And so though Jesus Christ belonged for all eternity to the throne room of heaven where he lived in all his splendor and majesty and holiness. Where he lived in unapproachable light where he was surrounded by fantastic beings all bowing down and worshipping him from all eternity.

- He was born just like us—actually rather not like us, most of us were born in a hospital, he was born in an animal stable.
- He grew up just like us.
- He had a step-father just like many of us.
- He sought asylum in a country not his own when his family fled to Egypt, far from all his family like many in this room have.
- He was abandoned by those who he loved most, just like many of us.
- And as he died upon the cross, though he had no sin and no shame in and of himself, he felt the searing burden of shame just like us as he took upon himself all of our shame.
- And he—the eternal one—experienced death, just like us as he breathed his last and was buried just like us.

And because of all of that Jesus Christ could say: To the humans, I became human, to win the humans.

And that is what Paul says he is participating in every single time he gives up his preferences, every single time he gives up his rights, every single time he practices self-denial for the sake of others. When he does that he becomes a participant in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is the prize we are training for. That is the prize we are running for. Don't you want to train for that? Don't you want to run for that?

Here's what this means for us. If you're a Christian it means begin to live out your freedom for the sake of others by practicing self-denial. Start by giving up your preferences for the sake of others in your connect group. Start by practicing this with your friends and giving up your preferences for them. Start by practicing this with your spouse giving up your preferences for your spouse.

And the more you do that, the more you become the kind of person who can give up your rights for others. And eventually you become the kind of person who is willing to become all things to all people in order that you might win some. And in doing all of that

you will find true freedom, true joy and your realise your true identity. This is how we participate in the gospel as Christians, by living sacrificial lives for the sake of others.

If you're not a Christian, you can participate in the gospel by laying down your rights too. Each and every one of us is trying in one way or another to buy or salvation. We try our hardest to be good, to be righteous. It's as if God is like Santa Claus going about handing out the gift of salvation only for those who are good for goodness sake.

But God is not like Santa Claus. Instead, of sitting in heaven checking his list, he came down—he became a human in order to win you. In order to offer salvation for those who are on the bad list. And the moment you stop trusting in yourself for salvation and begin trusting in him is the moment you begin to participate in the gospel.

And so, maybe you've been coming to church for a while, or you've been hanging around Christians for a while. Maybe you've been in church your whole life, but you've never actually participated in the gospel. In a few minutes we're going to do something that is an outward picture of what it means to participate in the gospel. We're going to take the Lord's Supper.

In effect, when we eat the bread and drink the wine we are saying, I'm a participant in the gospel. What Jesus Christ did when he died, he did for me, to win me—to save me from my sins.

And if you're here today and you've never participated in what Jesus did for you on the cross, but you want to, I'm inviting you to participate for the first time today. If you want the salvation that Jesus offers, it's free and it's for you. And you can begin participating in it today by putting your trust in Jesus Christ and in him alone for salvation.

With the life Jesus lived, it's as if he says, to the humans, I became human, to win the humans.

He wants to win you today.

Christian freedom means self-denial for the sake of others.