

# God's people, then and now

## Part 3

### 1 Corinthians 9:19-27 (NIV)

*<sup>19</sup> Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.*

*<sup>20</sup> 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.*

*<sup>21</sup> 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.*

*<sup>22</sup> 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.*

*<sup>23</sup> I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

*<sup>24</sup> 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.*

*<sup>25</sup> 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.*

*<sup>26</sup> Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.*

*<sup>27</sup> No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*

One of things we loved about tripping around was learning stuff. In Charleville, Outback Queensland, we visited the cosmos centre, looked through some pretty cool telescopes and learnt a whole lot of stuff about stars, their colours and temperatures, binary systems, sun flares and so on and we just loved that, new opportunities to find out more about the universe in which we live.

However, Sometimes I took it a little bit far. I'm a little OCD and if I go somewhere where there are boards full of written information, I have to read all of them, I mean all of them. I have to start at the beginning and work my way all the way to the end. Deb is very patient but even she has her limits. We were in Longreach in western Queensland where there are two huge fabulous museums, the Qantas Founders Museum and the Stockman's Hall of fame and we went through them one after the other, which meant hour after hour of reading all this new information. Eventually, exhausted, Deb had to call a halt dragging me a-way with tears in my eyes because I didn't know nearly enough about fine merino wool in the 1930's.



Maybe I take it a little too far, but what is true, is that one of the real keys to a vibrant life in which we continue to grow as people, is to always be open to learning new things. It is definitely one of the keys to growing as a Christian. We need to continue to be good students and we need to find good teachers.

One of the great Christian teachers of all time was Paul the apostle. In thirty years of teaching, Paul founded around 20 churches, taught and mentored many other leaders, who themselves went off and founded more churches. Paul's teaching has been preserved in the Bible for the last 2,000 years in the form of 11 letters and the DNA of a spiritual movement that would eventually spread around the world. He was the man! With an amazing CV, so you would think everyone would be hanging off his every word. But strangely that was not the case, not in the Corinthian church. In the ninth chapter of Paul's first letter, we get this picture of a group within the Corinthian church who are not at all interested in listening to their old teacher, so why?

Remember Last Sunday, our Paul, Paul Simpson, was preaching on chapter 8 of 1 Corinthians where Paul the apostle warned people about drifting back into their old pagan ways via food sacrificed to idols. Well it looks like this teaching had really annoyed some people so much so that they are trying to shut Paul down by attacking his credibility. Firstly, they questioned his leadership credentials, his standing as an apostle, because they never paid him a proper wage like a proper apostle. Secondly, they are claiming he was an inconsistent leader. That when he was their teacher, they saw him eating in the market place with gentiles, food that could well have come from a pagan temple, so who was he to tell them what they could and could not eat?

As you will see this was a pretty heavy deal for Paul and he responds in quite a raw and emotional way. Which at the same time offers us a fairly unique peak into the heart of this remarkable man and some of the things that make him tick. So let's pick it up at the first verse of chapter 9, Paul says:

*Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? (1 Corinthians 9:1)*

Which is a pretty good opening argument. As their founder, Paul is saying, well you're calling me a rubbish leader but you just happen to be the proof of my pudding. For the next 11 verses Paul goes on to argue passionately and powerfully that he had every right to be paid for his services as an apostle.

*If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? (1 Corinthians 9:11)*

However in verse 12 Paul reveals that the reason he was not payed was because he chose not to take any money from them so it would never get in the way of them becoming followers of Jesus,

*If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. (1 Corinthians 9:12)*

I totally get why Paul didn't want to confuse the issue with money. I once asked a high school scripture class why they thought I kept turning up and putting up with their rudeness and bad behaviour. More than half the class thought it was because I was being paid to teach them and when they found out that I did it for nothing - that I taught because I wanted to share these truths with them - it changed some of their attitudes.

But as to the Corinthians second criticism, that Paul was telling them to keep away from the pagan meat parties, while eating pagan meat himself, well this is just a bit of nit-picking. This is criticisms from people who are so caught up in their own small issues they totally fail to see the big issues. Paul deals with this very simply by opening up his chest and pouring out his passion and heart for what really matters.

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*<sup>20</sup> 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...*

*<sup>23</sup> I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 19, 20, 23)*

### **1. Do I have a passionate commitment to things that matter?**

In my early youth ministry days one of the kids connected to our church was discovered unconscious from a drug over dose and I ended up at Westmead hospital with members of the family not knowing if he would live or die. He died, two days later they switched the machines off. The next day I was trying to catch up on sleep when the phone kept ringing and I eventually answered it. It was the editor of our churches newsletter rousing on me for not getting my newsletter article in on time. So you can probably guess what happened next. That poor woman. She didn't know what had been going on, and I was too tired to say it gently, but at the end of the conversation she was in no doubt that I believed there were more important things than the weekly newsletter.

Do we have a passionate commitment to things that matter?

Paul says, *I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (1 Corinthians 19:19)*

Paul wasn't just hanging out and eating with the pagans, he was there to win people's eternal souls and that was the big picture the Corinthians were missing. Do you have a passionate commitment to things that matter? Because if you don't give yourself to things that matter, things that don't matter will be your life. Or to put it another way, small things will get to you when you don't have big things to guide you. Consider this as Paul's first challenge to us all this morning. Do you have a passionate commitment to things that matter?

There is a very profound spiritual principle at play here, in that as we move away from what the Corinthians were doing, which was obsessing about their own lives, and as we personally begin to live out our life to the beat of a bigger drum, a bigger story, then the very shape and value of our life changes. This is foundational to the life and teaching of Jesus who said; *"the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Matthew 20:28). Which is to say that the example of Jesus was to give his life away for a vastly meaningful cause, and in giving his life away he shows us how to find meaning for ourselves: *"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it."* (Matthew 16:25): *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."* (Matthew 6:33). If you find that your spiritual life has gone off the boil, if you are in turmoil over small things and you lack vision and direction, the first thing to look at is your lived out commitment to the gospel and nine times out of ten you will find that it has lost its focus in your life and as a consequence you have begun to feel spiritually dry and lost. Do you have a passionate commitment to things that matter?

## 2. Do I value self-discipline?

The second thing that Paul challenges me about is his incredible example of self-discipline.

*<sup>26</sup> Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.*

*<sup>27</sup> No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Corinthians 9:26-27)*

I need to hear this message regularly. You see there is this immature part of me that likes to eat food that is bad for me simply because I like it! - and that is a really flimsy way to live a life and this was the life being lived by the Corinthians, they were willing to break Paul's heart simply because they enjoyed the pagan lifestyle. To allow things into our lives simply for pleasure has always been a slippery slope. We end up pandering to that childish part of ourselves that wants to sit in a dark corner and eat all the lollies. The truth is, self-discipline is not going to hurt us. In fact it will help us to make, and stick with, good life choices. Everyone who turns something around in their life comes to a point where they finally take control of their lives. Where once they were running around aimlessly beating the air, they become

people who take control of their bodies, making their bodies their slave and not their master through a lived out purpose that gives a healthy shape to their life. Do you value self-discipline?

One of the things that baffles me is why spiritual life is sometimes the least disciplined element for people who live otherwise highly disciplined lives. People who exercise regularly, eat well and have good sleep patterns, can at the same time be spiritually ill-disciplined, lacking discernment about what they take into their souls, not attending to their spiritual needs with any kind of regularity or plan. Like every other area of life, if we fail to plan we plan to fail. As someone once gently suggested to me when I was being totally self-indulgent, suck it up and get a little backbone into your spiritual life. In other words stop making excuses, take that time, make that time and spend that time with God.

### **3. Do I really know God's grace?**

Finally, Paul's life challenges me, that if I am to sustain a passionate commitment to things that matter and if I am to truly value self-discipline then I have to have what Paul had, a life filled with God's loving grace, or I am going to run purely on effort and effort by itself is unsustainable. Again and again Paul points to God's grace as the power that fuelled his life. He talks about this towards the end of first Corinthians.

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10)*

In this ninth chapter of I Corinthians we see a heart in Paul that gives everything in service to the gospel, asking nothing in return, seeking no payment, willing to do anything even suffer for the sake of God's love for the world. We can see this in Paul's life because Paul has the spirit of Christ in him and that Spirit is all about grace, God demonstrating on the cross, that while we were undeserving, while we were uncaring, while we were totally disinterested, while we were lost in our sinfulness, Christ died for us out of love for us (Romans 5:8). We can track the impact of this extraordinary truth and power in Paul's life from the first day Jesus poured his free, un-asked for, un-merited love into the heart of Saul, a young murderous religious zealot on the road to Damascus. And slowly but surely we watch that grace transform Saul into Paul, the one who lays his life down in order to "*become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some* (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The most healthy spiritual lives arise out of hearts which grasp the height and depth (Romans 8:39) of God's love for us. Because we human beings measure out affection with a teaspoon we often struggle to grasp the wonder of a God who pours out love like an ocean, pouring out love on people who are neither deserving nor desiring any

kind of relationship with their creator. But this loving grace when it is received and accepted into our hearts is like a mighty river that changes everything, that washes away the debris of our small and petty egos in exchange for the strongest and deepest love ever experienced on the face of this planet.

So join with me this morning, breathe in the spirit of Paul's challenges.

- 1. Do I have a passionate commitment to things that matter?**
- 2. Do I value self-discipline?**
- 3. Do I really know God's grace?**