

The Heart of A Soul-Winner

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Introduction: When I was 19 years old, I rededicated my life to Jesus Christ. I had been saved as a young boy, but I did not live faithfully for my Lord as a teenager. In many ways my rededication was more life-changing than my conversion. I discovered a joy and happiness in Christ I had never known. Immediately I wanted to share about this new found relationship with others, but I did not know how. I quickly learned that a man named Jack Fordham taught what was called a “soul-winners class” every Wednesday night in the basement of the church. I immediately showed up. He taught me (and later my wife Charlotte) how to be a soul-winner by sharing the “Roman Road,” a simple gospel presentation. It goes like this:

- 1) Everyone is a sinner (Rom. 3:23)
- 2) Sin’s penalty is spiritual death and eternal separation from God (Rom. 6:23)
- 3) God loves us and demonstrated His love by sending Christ (His Son) to die for our sins (Rom. 5:8)
- 4) We can have our sins forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life by confessing and believing in Jesus (Rom 10:9-10, 13).

Soul-winning became a priority and practice in my life and it has been that way ever since!

The term “soul-winner” is not as popular as it once was, but I believe it needs to be revived! The Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon wrote a book entitled *The Soul Winner*. He believed soul-winning was essential to the life and vibrancy of the church. The apostle Paul would enthusiastically agree. In verses 19-22 he will use the word “win” five times in the context of reaching the lost. Soul-winning was a priority for the apostle, and it should be a priority for every follower of Christ. In 1 Cor. 9:19-27 Paul allows us to examine up close and personal the heart of a soul-winner. Two guiding principles are revealed for our careful consideration.

I. I deny myself to win souls for Christ 9:19-23

Paul talks for several chapters (chs. 8-10) about surrendering our rights for the blessing and benefit of others. He now applies that spiritual principle to soul-winning (see also 10:31-33). Paul gladly “flexes and bends” to win others to Christ. He, as D.A. Carson writes, “must not do anything that is forbidden to the Christian, and he must do everything mandated of the Christian” to win the lost, both Jew and Gentile alike (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 120). Paul will highlight four specific areas where he willingly denies himself to win souls for King Jesus. We do well to follow his example.

1) I willingly deny myself personally 9:19

Paul had one master and his name is Jesus. He is free from the opinions and expectations of men. And yet, his freedom in Christ also entails a certain kind of slavery as verse 19 makes plain. “Although I am free from all and not anyone’s slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people.” Paul belongs only to Christ having been bought by His blood and redemptive work on the cross (6:20; 7:23). And yet, he willingly makes himself a slave to all people that God might use him to bring (win) them to salvation. Warren Wiersbe says, “What a paradox: free from all men, and yet the servant [slave; Gr. *doulos*] of all men!” (*Be Wise*, 117). I gladly surrender my personal rights and make myself a slave of others that I “win more of them” to my King.

2) I willingly deny myself religiously 9:20

Paul applies his principle of “a slave to all for the souls of all” to the Jews. His words are simple and straight forward, but with an important caveat. “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law [of Moses], like one under the law – though I myself am not under the law – to win those under the law” (v. 20). Paul flexes his freedom in Christ for his fellow Jewish countrymen. Schreiner is correct when he writes, “His [Paul’s] ethnic identity as a Jew was...no longer the primary reality in his life; Paul identified himself first and foremost as a Christian.” And yet,

“Paul adapted, living as a Jew when with the Jews in order to win them” (*I Cor.* TNTC, 190-91). Now, let’s be clear. Paul did not return to honoring the sacrificial system Christ had fulfilled. He did not, as he once incorrectly did, advocate a works salvation theology. What he would do is have Timothy circumcised so he could more effectively evangelize among Jews (Acts 16:1-3). He, himself, would take a Nazirite vow and purify himself (Acts 18:18) so that there would be no unnecessary offense in trying to win Jews to faith in Messiah Jesus. Such practical accommodations were a small matter in the work of missions and evangelism.

3) I will deny myself socially

9:21

Paul now addresses his soul-winning relationship to Gentiles. His words in verse 22 are similar to those in verse 21, but they are not identical. He writes, “To those who are without the law; like one without the law – though I am not without God’s law but under the law of Christ – to win those without the law” (v. 21). Paul will flex to win Gentiles too, but his flexing goes in a different direction. Paul, like every Christian, has been set free from the Mosaic Covenant and its many ceremonial rules and regulations. Cultural and social separation from “Gentile dogs” was no longer a practice of his new life in Christ. However, and this is so very important, Paul is no antinomian (one with no law). His life is now guided and regulated by a

new law, what he calls “the law of Christ.” Gordon Fee notes, basically in passing (it in in a footnote!), “one should perhaps note the especially high Christology assumed by this phrase, which is unfortunately all too easily overlooked in most discussions of this passage” (*1 Cor.* NICNT, 474). Fee is right! Paul lives under a new and different law because he serves a new and different Lord. It is Christ! And how might we describe the law of Christ? Based upon Galatians 5:14-15; 6:2, the ethic of love must be at the core of any understanding. John 13:34-35 adds weight to this understanding. And yet returning to Fee’s observation, Paul’s Christology should also inform our understanding. The person, work and teachings of Christ are now preeminent in his life. They color and impact everything! Paul Gardner says it well, “Paul still concerns himself with the centrality of Christ. In 11:1 he says, “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.” His concern...obedience to Christ in day-to-day service. As a servant to all, Paul is first and foremost a servant of Christ.... He will not do what Christ would not do!” (*1 Cor.* ZECNT, 408). Being a faithful soul-winner has its limits. The Lordship of Jesus Christ trumps all.

4) I willingly deny myself completely 9:22-23

Paul brings his argument full circle (v. 19). He also adds a third category of persons, those he previously addressed in 8:7-13. He calls them “the

weak.” This phrase, as noted in a prior study, is open to serious misunderstanding. Often, it is understood, wrongly, in a derogatory sense. This is not Paul’s intent at all. Paul uses the phrase to identify new believers who have come out of paganism and idolatry. They stand in contrast to arrogant “know it all’s” who placed greater value on knowledge than love (cf. 8:1). Gardner makes a particular application to the gift of knowledge (12:8) and those who were flaunting this gift at the expense of others. He writes, “Paul has used the word “weak” to describe a people who have been made to feel inferior because they are not exercising certain rights related to gifts of the Spirit, such as wisdom or knowledge. These people are looked down upon by the elitists or “knowers” and so have been made to feel weak. Yet, in God’s eyes the so-called “weak” belong to him even without these (merely) human markers...the word “weak” should not be seen as a derogatory term or even a description of a people who are basically inadequate in one way or another. In chapter 8 Paul sided with the weak, and ever since 1:27 “weak” has been a term that has been used to contrast one group of people against the arrogant” (*1 Cor*, 409).

Paul will accommodate Jews. He will accommodate Gentiles. He will accommodate the weak in the eyes of men but favored in the sight of God. “To the weak, I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all

things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some” (v. 22). Leon Morris provides a helpful word at this point: “This whole discussion has underlined Paul’s tender concern for the weak. But, unlike the Jews and the Gentiles of the previous verses, the weak were already Christians. He does not seek to win them in the same sense, but to win them for greater strength, or perhaps simply to keep them from slipping. He respected their scruples and conformed his behavior to theirs to help them” (*1 Cor*, TNTC, 136).

Thus, Paul can summarize his position in v. 23, “Now I do this all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.” The gospel of Christ above all enters the picture again. So does the humility of the apostle. He simply wishes to share in the blessings of soul winning. We are co-laborers, partners (ch. 3). We are in the work of soul-winning together. We should work hard to finish our assignment well. Paul will turn to that goal in verses 24-27 drawing from the field of athletics.

II. I discipline myself to win the Savior’s crown 9:24-27

The Bible is fond of using athletic images to illustrate the Christian life. Second Timothy 2:5 uses the image of an athlete in general, Eph. 6:12 a wrestler; 1 Cor. 9:26 boxing, and Gal. 5:7; 1 Cor. 9:24; 2 Tim. 4:7 and Heb. 12:1-2 running a race. Here Paul appeals to a race and boxing to urge the

Corinthians to finish well, to win. The Isthmian Games of Corinth and/or the Olympian games may provide the background. These were popular events the Corinthians would readily identify with.

1) We compete like a runner

9:24-26

Paul begins v. 24 with a familiar rhetorical question: “don’t you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize?” The purpose and goal of a race is to win. Therefore, Paul writes, “Run in such a way to win (*ESV*, “obtain”) the prize. Paul is running the race to win souls for Jesus. That is the prize he wants to win and he is willing to “become all things to all people” (v. 22) to win the prize of their salvation. Now to achieve this prize, a certain mindset and lifestyle is required. In the world of athletics, the strategy of winners is well known. “Everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything” (v. 25). They “do not run like one who runs aimlessly” (v. 26). Runners train and they train hard. They run wind-sprints if they are a sprinter, they run miles and miles if they run long distance. They watch their diet, they get sufficient rest, and they train their body day in and day out in order to win the race. In similar fashion, salvation in Christ captivates, compels and constrains us as we run the race of the Christian life for His glory.

At the end of verse 25, Paul describes the prize we seek. Athletes in the Isthmian or Olympic games run “to receive a perishable crown (*ESV*, “wreath”), one made out of celery, parsley, pine or some other leafy material. It is nice for a while, but it soon withers away. In striking contrast, we run to win “an imperishable crown.” Kistemaker notes that, “The New Testament teaches that [the imperishable crown] is righteousness, eternal life, and glory” (*I Cor*, NTC, 313). I would certainly affirm that to be true. And yet, in the context of this passage, the souls of men must be considered as a part of the imperishable crown. Winning Jews and Gentiles to salvation in Christ is an imperishable reward because the gift of God is eternal life. Wiersbe is on target, “In order to give up his rights and have the joy of winning lost souls, Paul had to discipline himself. That is the emphasis of this entire chapter: Authority (rights) must be balanced by discipline. If we want to serve the Lord and win His reward and approval, we must pay the price.” (*Be Wise*, 119).

2) We compete like a boxer

9:26-27

Paul introduces the metaphor of a boxer to draw an analogy to the activity of a soul-winner. He informs the Corinthians that he does not box like one beating the air” (v. 26). Vaughn says, “The expression suggests either shadow boxing or missing one’s opponent” (*I Cor*. BSC, 98). A boxer is

not haphazard or aimless in a boxing match. He works hard in training to prepare himself to deliver effective punches with the goal of knocking out his opponent and winning the match. He recognizes that stamina is essential. Therefore, and like a boxer in training, Paul writes, “I discipline (*NIV*, “strike a blow,” *CEB*, “I’m landing punches”) my body and bring it under strict control.”

Morris captures the import of the Greek text when he writes, “In picturesque language [Paul] speaks of the way he disciplines himself. Beat renders *hypōpiazō*, a verb from boxing, with the meaning ‘give a black eye to.’ This, coupled with make it my slave, leaves no doubt as to the vigour with which Paul subdues his body.” (*1 Cor*, TNTC, 138).

Paul works his body over, beating it up, making it a slave in order that he will win the prize and not come up short in his holy calling as a soul-winner. Paul does not want to preach the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ to others, only to fail along the way and become “disqualified.” The word “disqualified” is a strong work in the Greek text (*adokimos*), leading some excellent scholars to believe Paul is talking about one’s salvation. However, the context of being a fit, prepared, and qualified soul-winner for all people groups leads me to conclude that Paul’s fear is we could become disqualified in our service to the Lord, especially the service of being an effective soul-

winner to Jew and Gentile alike. Such disqualifying actions could be ethical, moral or even theological. As 1 Cor. 3:15 affirms, it is possible to have our works consumed by the blazing fire of the Judgment Seat of Christ (also 2 Cor. 5:10), even though we are saved. Bottomline: Paul wants us to begin well, run well, and finish well as a soul-winner for Christ. It will require rigorous discipline, but in the end we will see it was worth it.

Conclusion: Their names were John Leonard Dober and David Nitschman. They were Moravian missionaries who were willing to sell themselves literally into slavery to win the lost with the gospel. Here is their story: “It was a slave himself who stirred the Moravian church in Germany into action [to the West Indies] in 1731, when Anthony Ulrich, a former slave from St. Thomas then in the country, was invited by Count Zinzendorf to make a plea for missionaries to be sent to the West Indies, before the congregation of Herrnhut. He told them that no one could possibly preach to the slaves unless he first became a slave himself. They had to work all day on the plantations, and after sunset were not allowed to go out. Thus no one could preach who did not work with them. Dober and Nitschmann, two prominent members of the congregation, volunteered to go, and Dober was actually prepared to see himself into slavery, had not the law of the Danish West Indies prohibited it. Instead, Dober started his work as an overseer on a cotton plantation, and Nitschmann did jobs as a carpenter.” There is a tradition that says

as they said goodbye to their weeping families, they shouted from their ship, “May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of this suffering.” Here are the hearts of a soulwinner. May our Lord grant to us a heart like theirs, a heart like Paul’s, a heart like our King. (*Moravian Missionaries and Slaves in the West Indies*, Oliver W. Furley, *Caribbean Studies*, July 1965, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Jul., 1965), pp. 3-16).