

Prayers

To God

Pray in praise, pray in confession, pray in thanksgiving, and with confidence that you are heard.

For myself

Theme - 'standing tall'

Dear Jesus, help me to accept all that I must do for you
Sometimes I would like to stand back and let others take the strain
Sometimes I must put my shoulder to the plough and get stuck in
Sometimes I must encourage others and set a good example
Sometimes I must keep quiet and claim nothing for what I do
But in all things, dear Jesus, strengthen me to do Your will
AMEN

For others

Pray against the forces of evil that drag us to war, and pray against the apathy that blinds us to the real reasons why people feel vulnerable and fight for their rights. Pray for God's Kingdom to come.

Meditation

Where can I find peace for my life
Except within the breast of one who knows my pain?

Where can I find truth for my mind
Except within the Word implanted in the world?

Where can I find hope for my future
Except within the eternal promises of my Saviour?

Where can I find love for my heart
Except within the very body and blood of Christ?

Where can I find health for my body
Except within the touch of One who came to save?

Where can I find true happiness for my soul
Except within the Gospel of a God who comes to me?

Where can I find fulfilment for my spirit
Except within the heart of the one who made me ...?

Bible Passage

1 Cor 9:15-27

¹⁵ But I have not used any of these my rights, neither am I writing this so that they may be applied to me. I would rather die! No one will deny me the reason for my boast! ¹⁶ If I preach the gospel, this

is no reason for boasting, for a duty has been placed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ Now if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not, then I have been entrusted with a responsibility. ¹⁸ Then what really is my reward, when in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel?

¹⁹ For, being one who of all people is free, I have enslaved myself to all, so that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) in order to win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) in order to win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, in order that I might be sure to save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

²⁴ Do you not know that the runners in the games all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run so that you may make it your own! ²⁵ Those who compete exercise self-control in every way, and they do it to receive a perishable wreath; but we do it for one that is imperishable. ²⁶ Because of this I do not exert myself pointlessly, nor do I box as if beating the air; ²⁷ but I exert my body and enslave it, lest after proclaiming to others I myself should fail the test.

Review

In yesterday's passage, Paul has set out scriptural principles of provision for apostles and evangelists, and his message has benefited all who do the Lord's work. Their needs must be met so that the work of the Gospel can continue without hinderance (9:3-7); it is a point made with good scriptural backing from the Old as well as New Testament! Paul insists that nothing must be allowed to get in the way of the Gospel, and while this mostly means that church leaders and workers must be paid, he believes there are times when this privilege must be set aside, but for the sake of the Gospel (9:14). One such occasion was when he was setting up the church in Corinth, and he is aghast that people should question his apostleship when it was he who founded the church in which they find themselves (9:10,11).

So now, in this passage, Paul talks very personally about his sense of duty to the Gospel, and does his best to defend himself against the accusation that he is boasting about his work. In the process, however, he typically highlights some important features of the Gospel (9:15-18). Then, in a remarkable passage of further self-revelation, he famously describes himself as '*enslaved*' to all (9:19) for the sake of the Gospel. Nothing must stand in the way of the Gospel, and this is the driving force behind all Paul's theology and also his day to day decisions about his life (9:19-23). Lastly, in this chapter, Paul illustrates all he has said in this chapter with a famous picture of self-control from sport. The one who would work for the Lord must be more dedicated to the Gospel than a runner or a boxer in training (9:24-27).

Boasting in the Gospel (9:15-18)

It could be said that this brief paragraph prefigures the whole of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul must respond to the accusation that he boasts about his work for the Lord (see 2 Cor. 1:12f. 10:8f., 11:12f.). On the one hand, Paul is furious that this comment draws attention to himself rather than the Saviour, but on the other hand, he refuses to stand back from the accusation if his boasting of Jesus Christ will serve God's glory! This ambivalence lies behind both 2 Corinthians and also the emotional manner in which Paul speaks in this passage.

Having summarised his position over the receiving of 'benefits', saying, '*I have not used any of these rights ...*' (9:15), Paul is furious that anyone at Corinth should misinterpret his motives or his mission, and declares emotively, '*I would rather die*' (9:15). His boast is not that he preaches the Gospel, for it is a '*duty placed on me*', a feature of his life in Christ that has become so important he cannot but preach; it is his very nature (9:16). He then states the obvious, which is that if he was preaching the Gospel to fulfil some personal need or desire then doing it would be a sufficient reward for his soul. However the reality is different, for God has called him to this task; he says, '*I have been entrusted with a responsibility*' (9:17).

What benefit does Paul then gain from being a preacher of the Gospel, if any? It is a question he leaves in mid-air at this point, but returns to later. We must wait until the end of the next paragraph to get an answer, and in the mean time he reveals more of his motive for preaching (9:19-23).

A slave for Jesus Christ (9:19-23)

This next paragraph has become well known. It describes in the simplest manner the pure Gospel motive for doing the work of the church, in evangelism and indeed in pastoral work and much more. Paul uses his personal status as a free man to start this discussion; he values this freedom of being a Roman citizen highly and believes that it is fundamental to God's use of him as an evangelist and apostle. How much more then should we who live in the free world rejoice with Paul in the freedoms we have in order to be God's servants in the world? Those who are free can speak of Christ and do his will, where Christians who are enslaved either personally or within their culture, e.g. in Syria, Pakistan, Egypt, Burma or Tibet, simply do not possess the freedoms we take for granted, and the open work of the Gospel to win souls is therefore strictly limited.

Yet how does Paul use this freedom, and how should we use it? Remarkably, he says he is willing to surrender his freedoms in order to preach the Gospel. His words are remarkable; *'to the Jews I became like a Jew ... to those outside the law I became as one outside the law (that is, a Gentile) ... to the weak I became weak ...'* (9:20-22) and in each case, the reason for this surrender of personal liberty is the same; *'in order to win Jews ... In order to win those outside the law ... In order to win the weak ...'* (9:20-22). Paul's summary of this approach to the work of the Gospel is now famous, and stands as a key scripture defining Christian ministry today; *'I have become all things to all people, in order that I might be sure of saving some ...'* (9:22). Few words explain this Gospel motive better. Some may question whether it is possible to be like this, but this is not the question. Paul is describing the heart of a seriously committed minister of God's grace, willing to do anything and be anything in order to do the Father's will.

At the end of this paragraph Paul adds one further comment. In the previous paragraph Paul asked *'what really is my reward'* (9:18)? He did not answer this question, but now we have an answer. He is content to receive his *'share in the blessings'* of the Gospel (9:23), and if we were to ask him what these were, he would surely tell us that these includes salvation by faith, eternal life with the Father, peace with God, and more.

The runner and the boxer

Our last paragraph is a remarkable text which is frequently preached upon though perhaps not well understood. Paul speaks of runners competing in a race for a prize, and he urges all competitors to train hard to gain the *'imperishable wreath'* of victory (9:25)! We assume that Paul is speaking of the race of Christian life and the imperishable wreath of salvation; but we must be careful. The chapter we are reading tells us that Paul is not speaking about salvation in general, but the more specific race of preaching the Gospel. Moreover, the wreath is the prize of having completed what God has called the individual Christian to do.

So instead of thinking of this passage as a description the Christian life, we must rethink. The race is the work of the Gospel in which Christians leaders and those called to evangelise will train and compete to achieve Gospel results. It is a specific call, and although all Christians should perhaps aspire to the work of the Gospel, many stand back. Unfortunately, some will enter the race and win the crown of God's approval for having done His work, though others will either not enter the race or come up short, being unfit to finish. It is a salutary illustration designed for all those who would consider the all-embracing call of the Gospel.

This is a hard point for us to hear, but the world is a hard place to win anything without training, which is Paul's point. God's apostles are given heavenly help, but they cannot depend on it and not do any work; tough training in the things of God is what will get results. More specifically, Paul knows that he must de-sensitise himself to the rules and regulations used in religion and church structures. His last illustration is that of a boxer in training, working supremely efficiently to be effective. Paul's aim of course is the effective preaching of the Gospel of Christ; all else is insignificant.

Discipleship

Application

Giving all for the Gospel

As most of us go to church on Sunday, we would be hard pushed to think of everyone as entering a race and giving all for the Gospel; but perhaps we ought to! Are we not all called to be ministers of the Gospel in some way, and work to win others for Christ? However we answer this question, and whatever we think of the many who come to church with no intention of giving themselves to God's work and ministry, this passage

remain very important. It tells all who would give themselves for the Gospel call that their reward is exclusively the satisfaction of having done God's will. They also benefit from knowing that they have an eternal reward, and His gracious heavenly favour.

People give their lives to the Gospel call in many different ways. Some give it through offering for full time ministry either ordained or lay. Others offer their lives through honest and persistent Christian witness in all and any walk of life, as the Lord directs or as life unfolds in all its peculiar complexity. For everyone, there is something important about Paul's words here, encouraging us all to be adaptable according to the mission situation in which we find ourselves. All things are possible for those who will do His will.

The race ... and the fight ...

Paul asks that we consider training for the task of mission. The idea is anathema to some, for the belief is held that if someone is intended for a task they should get on and do it, relying on the gifting of God and learning through experience and doing. Such an approach leaves too many feeling underused and useless, however, having never been encouraged to use the skills and gifts that lie latent within. The purpose of training is to bring out these abilities and generate enthusiasm, and also to help those who are gifted to gain experience faster by learning from the experience of others. This training could be through lectures, reading books or practical exercises observed and used for training. All such methods are valuable for training, and Paul's model of an athlete and a boxer should be in the minds of all who train to become the theologians, pastors, ministers, evangelists, worship leaders and more, within the church. Training can be hard, but it will better enable us to win the race of proclaiming the Gospel, sometimes against the odds, and winning souls for Christ as we are commissioned.

Ideas for what to do

- *Discuss with a friend at church whether freedom is an essential ingredient for the effective proclamation of the Gospel. Discuss what this passage says about this subject and share your thoughts about it.*
- *Pray for leaders of God's people who find it hard to be 'all things to all people' in order to proclaim the Gospel effectively*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What does this passage teach us about the privilege of preaching the Gospel?*
2. *How can anyone 'be all things to all people'? What does this extraordinary phrase mean, and how do you think it applies to leaders of the church today?*
3. *Discuss the picture of the race contained within this passage. What is the race and what is the prize, and why does Paul give an illustration of something that is competitive? Or is the competitive nature of the sport irrelevant to Paul's point here?*

Final Prayer

Lord God, You have seen and heard Your people commit, struggle and confess their sins for centuries; come rushing through us now like a torrent of water, and by the power of Your Holy Spirit cleanse us, and make us victorious over all the powers of evil. Thank You Lord God: AMEN