

### ***All Things to All People***

In the name of him who came to preach the Good News of the God's kingdom, dear friends in Christ: Jesus had created quite a stir in Capernaum. Earlier on that Sabbath day while he was serving as the guest preacher in a local synagogue, he had cast out a demon from a possessed man. Then as we heard today, immediately after the service, he had gone to the home of Simon Peter and there cured the disciple's mother-in-law from a fever. Even though it was the Sabbath which prevented people from walking around town, word still passed through the neighborhoods, and as soon as the sun set and the Sabbath was over, most of the city was standing there surrounding the house. They came because they heard that the doctor was in, and they were seeking cures from all their ailments.

Jesus, in mercy, indulged them. He worked long into the night, casting out demons, healing injuries, curing diseases, freeing people from every distress. At length they had to shut it down. It was late. People were getting tired. Jesus was exhausted. Tomorrow would be a new day.

Ah, but when the crowd reassembled early the following morning, they found that Jesus already had left the building. He had moved on. And when his disciples caught up with him and told him how eagerly everyone was seeking him, he told them he wasn't going back. Those people were looking for temporary fixes to life's problems. His focus was on the far more important mission to preach the Gospel, to proclaim the Words of Eternal Life, to free people from not just from symptoms of sin's curse, but from the deadly disease of sin itself. He wanted people's attention to be focused less on the here and now, and more on the all important eternal future.

The main mission of Jesus' earthly ministry was not to heal mankind's temporal aches, pains, and complaints, but rather to fulfill the content of the Gospel by his sacrificial death on the cross and his justifying resurrection to new life, and then to get that message out there – for in that message there is God's own power to grant forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life to those who believe. Every single person Jesus healed got sick again. They died. But those who received his Gospel in faith live even though they die.

It may seem odd, then, that comparatively few people heard the full content of the Gospel preached by Jesus in person. It wasn't until after his Ascension and his sending of the Holy Spirit that the Word really began to spread. The thing to see, though, is that Jesus is still preaching; the only difference is that now he's doing it through the mouths of others. He told his disciples "who hears you hears me". And he sent them out as his Apostles and Evangelists, greatly magnifying the reach and extent of his ministry. The Gospel spread into all the known world – and not just through the mouths of the Apostles, but also by the mouths of countless others who received the Word and shared it with their family, friends, and neighbors.

But speaking of Apostles and the spread of the Gospel, in today's Epistle we hear from St. Paul, the man who became Christ's main workhorse to get the job done. It's odd because he is one of the last people on earth that anyone would have guessed to be chosen for the task. Slight of build, sickly, not a particularly strong or gifted speaker – he seemed to lack the necessary credentials. Making him even more of an unlikely candidate is that he had been a fanatically dedicated Pharisee – an extreme legalist – who hated everything about Christ and

those who followed him. He spearheaded the effort to stamp out Christianity because he was convinced that it was a dangerous and heretical cult.

It was that mission that led him to journey to Damascus with a warrant from the high priest to arrest and bring back Christians who had fled there to escape the persecution they were suffering in Jerusalem. And there on the road, as you know, is where Paul encountered the resurrected Lord Jesus. The man he thought long dead (and deservedly so) and whose followers he was bent on destroying turned out to be the Lord he thought he was obeying. Nope. Imagine having everything you thought was right turn out to be exactly wrong. How would it be to think that you were faithfully serving the Lord only to find out you were fighting against him, cursing his name, and serving Satan? What would you feel? Stark raving terror. Panic to the nth degree. Rightful fear of eternal hellfire.

But much to his surprise, that's not what he got. After three days "in the dark" feeling death itself closing in on him, he received mercy. He received Christ's forgiveness. He received his sight – and for the first time in his life he could clearly see the truth: how in Christ God is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. Serving the Lord is not about meticulously keeping hundreds of nitpicky rules and regulations, it's about acknowledging the totality of your sinfulness and trusting in Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Paul's formerly Pharisaical mind and his history of persecuting Christians gave him a unique perspective on and appreciation for the Gospel. That Jesus would take upon himself the sins of the whole world, suffer and die in the worst way imaginable, and then extend his blood bought mercy to forgive even me, a man who had repeatedly cursed his name and imprisoned, tortured, and killed his followers – why, that's a love beyond human understanding. It grants peace and confidence beyond understanding. And it created in Paul a burning passion to get this powerful saving Gospel message to others who were as lost and in the dark as he had been. And that's good, because he later received something else from the Lord Jesus, namely his commission to preach – to serve the Lord as an Apostle and Evangelist – and not specifically to the house of Israel, but to the world at large.

This is what Paul is talking about in today's Epistle: the necessity placed upon him. Jesus commanded me to preach, and so I must whether I want to or not. But that isn't the case. I want to. The love of God I have received compels me. I am not under the law of do's and don'ts. I am under the law of Christ – the law of his love. And I want to bring as many people as I can into the embrace of that love.

And because of this Paul wants to remove every human obstacle he can that might get in the way of people hearing his message and receiving it in faith. He cites three specific examples of this. First, he reminds the people to whom he is writing, the Christian congregation that he had founded in Corinth, that while he was with them he accepted no payment from them for his work in preaching and teaching the Gospel. The Scriptures are clear on this matter. Those whose work is teaching the Gospel are entitled to make their living from the Gospel. You gotta pay your pastor – a truth for which I'm profoundly grateful. But Paul refused payment from the Corinthians during the 18 months he was with them.

Why did he do that? Corinth was not far from Athens which was the intellectual center of the ancient Mediterranean world. It's where all the hot shot philosophers and big thinkers hung out. And students from everywhere went there to study under those bright lights. They paid them big bucks to learn from these great men of science of philosophy. Those teachers who

couldn't quite cut the mustard with the big boys in Athens, looked for work nearby. Corinth was a logical choice. And so the city served as sort of the playing field for the minor league philosophers who were hoping to step up into the big league. They practiced their art and gathered their less-paying students there. Paul wanted to make it plain to everyone that he wasn't one of those guys – a second rate teacher for hire. He thought – and probably rightly so – that some of his hearers would see his taking pay as an impediment to giving his words fair consideration. And he didn't want that to happen.

Still, he had to eat. So what did he do to get by? Well, it happened that the couple he stayed with while in Corinth worked in the same career field in which Paul had been trained. Most texts translate what they did as "tentmakers", but what the word actually means is someone who works with canvass. And because Corinth was a major port city, it's far more likely that what they did was make sails for ships. The nice thing about it, though, is that someone can sew and teach at the same time. So that's what Paul did. From time to time he also received mission support funding from some congregations he had previously founded farther north in Macedonia. In Christian love they too wanted to help spread the Gospel through Paul's work in Corinth. But again, Paul's not receiving pay from the congregation there was intended to remove any prejudice from his hearers and open their ears fully to the Gospel.

The other thing Paul did to remove obstacles was to adapt himself to the customs and practices of the people he was with. Most major Greek cities like Corinth had a small Jewish community living there. And Paul's usual method was to start with them. They knew the Scriptures. They were waiting for the Messiah to appear. All Paul had to do was tell them that the Savior they were waiting for had come in the person of Jesus Christ. But typically the Jewish community was very cliquish. They had their ceremonial traditions, their festivals, their dietary restrictions, their special washings and what not. As a Christian, Paul knew that all of that had been fulfilled in Christ. He was under no obligation to observe all those rules. But he also knew that if he didn't observe them while with a group of Jews, they would be offended. They wouldn't want to hear what he had to say. So when with Jews, Paul played along.

On the flip side, if he were with a group of Gentiles, he played by their rules. If he was invited over for supper to a Gentile's home and the host served him raw oysters on the half shell with a side of pork kabobs – things that as a Jewish Pharisee would have made him physically sick even to think about eating – he'd smile happily, thank the host, and chow down, giving every impression of sheer delight.

Paul also adapted his message and teaching style to the relative spiritual maturity of his hearers. To the weak, he says, I became weak. You can't teach preschoolers the same way you do adults; nor can you teach infants in the faith like you do the spiritually more mature. Paul was flexible, adapting himself to the needs of his hearers.

As he says, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." That was his goal: the salvation of souls for whom Christ in love gave his life. And this is that takeaway for us. In this life there is nothing more important than saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and his Gospel of salvation. Nothing. Not health, wealth, achievement, family, friends – nothing. And we who have this saving faith are under Christ's law of love to share it with those who don't. We can't make people believe. That's the work of God. But faith comes by hearing the Word. And we have mouths to speak. So speak we must – but we want to do it in a winsome way. We want to meet people where they are, however they are, with whatever preconceived notions they have, and gently, persistently, prayerfully, help them come to see the truth. We must become all things to all people in order to save some because ultimately that's

what Christ himself is. All things in time and eternity depend on him, so he is for us “all things”. May he give us the courage, the flexibility, the will, and most importantly the words that will help to grow and expand his kingdom, bringing many who are as yet in darkness into the marvelous light of his wondrous truth. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***