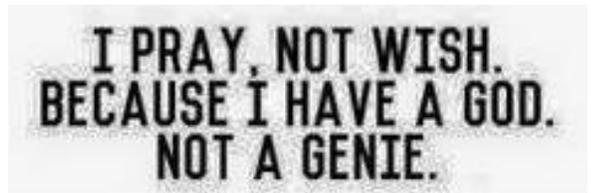


Isaiah 40:21-31
 Psalm 147:1-12, 21c
 1 Corinthians 9:16-23
 Mark 1:29-39



I DO IT ALL FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL

There are two views of Christian conduct which, when carried to the extreme, can get us off on the wrong track. Discuss how either of the following, even if they are true, could lead one away from Christ:

- (1) The Law of God is right. Even though it seems harsh at times, it must be obeyed without exception.
- (2) The greatest of God's laws is love. With this in mind, we may at times overlook the old rules and laws.

There are plenty of scriptures that seem to support both ideas. Jesus, in his teaching and life, showed how to walk between them, but it seems to take a lifetime and more to learn his ways and follow him in this.

Paul said that, for the sake of the gospel, he was willing to "*become all things to all men*" (1 Cor 9:22)¹. In other words, he was willing to adjust his treatment of others to fit each situation as it came.

Interestingly, a similar attitude became very popular in the 1960's. Known as "*Situation Ethics*," this philosophy held that one's morals or ethics of behavior should be modified in each situation, being guided solely by the rule that someone should benefit and no one should get hurt. The following lines from Joseph Fletcher's book² are guaranteed to get a discussion started in any Bible study:

"Christian situation ethics reduces law from a statutory system of rules to the love canon alone." (p.69)

"It is right or wrong to follow a principle only according to who gets hurt, and how much." (p.144)

"A free man's "moral life takes on the shape of adventure, ceases to pretend to be a blueprint. In all humility, knowing he cannot escape the human margin of error, he will – in Luther's apposite phrase – sin bravely." (p.135)

Situation Ethics became popular because it is easy and tempting. It is easy to forget (or not even know) how someone else might be hurt when you are pleasing yourself. Because Situation Ethics seems attractive, we do not notice at first its essential selfishness and appeal to pride. You, rather than God, get to choose what is right or wrong based on "who gets hurt, and how much."

In 1 Cor 9 we can easily see why Paul's version of "situation ethics" is different, especially in terms of the *motives* one has in choosing how to behave. We can see *why* Paul said, "*I have become all things to all men.*" In these contrasting versions, the authors are presenting different ways, or "ethics," which really suggest different moral principles to follow in life. You and I often must choose which to follow.

1 Cor 9:15-18. *But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have any one deprive me of my ground for boasting. ¹⁶For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. ¹⁸What then is my reward? Just this: that in my preaching I may make the gospel free of charge, not making full use of my right in the gospel.*

• *I have made no use of any of these rights* (v.15). Paul was speaking of his right to expect material support as pastor of the Corinthian church. In 9:1-14 he argued that as the field laborer gets a share of the harvest, so the pastor should receive offerings from the church. The Jews understood this tradition. Their priests and rabbis were supported as ordained in the law (see Numbers 18:8ff, for example). But Paul used the laborer rather than the priest to illustrate the point because in his day the priests took advantage of their right to the first fruits. Their selfishness and greed had become a byword among the common people, who could rarely

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

² Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, Westminster Press, 1966.

afford a meal anything like the meals the priests ate daily.

In fact, the priests of that day had fallen into two kinds of practice that are dangers for any leader of any congregation in any age. First, they became greedy. They found ways to extract wealth from the very people who trusted and depended on them to lead them in faith and worship, and didn't seem bothered when, after paying taxes and making the required sacrifices, the people had little left for themselves. Our Lord observed all this and said, "*They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger*" (Matt 23:4).

Second – and this is more subtle and difficult to recognize in one's self – they became proud. Again Jesus said, "*They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men. ...*" (Matt 23:5ff). Any person, man or woman, given a shepherding role in the church must guard against vanity and self-sought recognition. We are never to seek honor from men. "*Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves*" (Luke 22:26). We are tempted to disregard this, even though Jesus made his whole life an example of it.

This is what Paul was alluding to when he said, "*I have made no use of any of these rights.*" He mostly managed to avoid these temptations and keep his eyes on Christ. When he needed funds, he worked at making tents (Acts 18:1-4). When the people began to exalt Paul and Barnabas as gods, they tore their garments (a sign of distress) and cried out to them, "*Men, why are you doing this? We also are men, of like nature with you ...*" (Acts 14:15). Paul would have none of this, and neither should we.

- *What then is my reward?* (v.18) Paul saw his work first as a *calling*. He knew Jesus had called him to the task. "*Necessity is laid upon me,*" he said (v.16). Wealth had nothing to do with it. Those who work to become rich or famous, or to gain approval by men, learn eventually how little joy there is in doing so.

Second, Paul saw his work as a *ministry*. Wherever he went, Paul was instrumental in mending shattered lives, healing the scars left by sin, and bringing lost souls to Christ. Anyone who has participated in even the least amount of this kind of work knows the rewards are priceless and beyond measure.

1 Cor 9:19-23. *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law -- though not being myself under the law -- that I might win those under the law. ²¹To those outside the law I became as one outside the law -- not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ -- that I might win those outside the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

- *I have become all things to all men* (v.22). This saying of Paul, although it sounds like situation ethics, is not situation ethics at all. Paul was not listening to his own voice and making decisions for his own benefit, based on "who gets hurt, and how much." His words and actions were driven by one singular motive: "*that I might by all means save some*" (v.22).

You might be thinking this idea of becoming *all things to all men* applies mainly to evangelists – people in Paul's line of work. But you and I also are called in this ministry. In our noisy, impersonal world we must learn to empathize with people, especially with family and loved ones. We must listen to what they say, and sense the things they are not saying. Paul reaped a great harvest of souls from this practice. Not only did he create a large following in the church; he also made a large number of close friends.

- *I do it all for the sake of the gospel.* We see again in Paul's ministry the path we may take, by the grace of God. If we follow Jesus faithfully, we will not be seeking our own gain or our own popularity. We will be seeking the will of God, and the salvation of men.

In the final analysis, it comes down to motives. The paradox of Christian life (and the problem with "situation ethics") is that if I aim first to please myself and secondly to please God, I will do neither; but if I aim only, above all things, to please God, he will see that I do so, and will throw into the bargain a life truly worth living, with his own brand of pleasure that I would not otherwise have known.