

FAITH REFRACTED: 4. TESTIFY

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1 Corinthians 9:16-23

As a Pastor, I am in what is known as a “helping profession.” A helping profession is a profession that addresses the concerns of a person's physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual well-being. These professions include medicine, nursing, social work, education, counseling, and of course ministry. Helping professions have their own particular set of demands. They require us to get close to other people and to allow others to get close to us.

Boundaries—personal and professional—are necessary and allow us to function in as healthy manner as possible.

When I was in seminary, one of my friends was serving a local church as an intern. A church family invited him to their home to have lunch after the Sunday worship. He went because it was an opportunity to get to know this family. Then after lunch, the father told my friend that now he (my friend) would help the man reseal their driveway. It wasn't an invitation; it came across as an expectation, an order. My friend didn't know what to do, so he stayed and helped seal the driveway, still dressed in his church clothes. But he came back to school angry and resentful for having been manipulated in this way. The man, clearly, had crossed a boundary. My friend was too young and inexperienced to know how to handle the situation.

So, I cringe when I read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians where he declares: *I have become all things to all people*. This does not sound at all healthy to me. It sounds like he has torn down all personal boundaries. It sounds like he is saying, I will be whatever anyone needs me to be with no respect to my own personal or emotional requirements.

We need boundaries or else we run the risk of a loss of self-awareness. In other words, we lose an understanding of who we are and how we relate to other people. Without boundaries, we can become angry and resentful, we lose the ability to become assertive and say “no.” Without boundaries we can become drained and prone to burnout.

There are, of course, legitimate emergencies that require our attention. Having healthy boundaries helps us differentiate between the needs that need addressing now and those that can be addressed at an appropriate time.

So, why did Paul say that he had *become all things to all people*?

I CORINTHIANS 9:16-23

The Apostle Paul founded the Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth around the year 50 AD. Although he had moved on to another mission field, he kept in touch with his former parishioners in Corinth. He had heard through several sources of the conflicts and divisions that had arisen among the people in the church. In response, Paul composes these letters in which he offers his guidance, teachings, encouragement, and love. His intent is expressed early in the letter where he says, *Now I appeal to you... that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose* (1 Corinthians 1:10).

The issues plaguing the church include people siding with different preachers, lawsuits among church members, eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, questions about marriage, questions about spiritual gifts, and more. The bulk of this letter seeks to address these issues—issues we've been discussing for the past 4 weeks.

But in chapter 9, Paul takes a break from the discussions of conflicts and talks to the people about his role as an apostle. Specifically, he talks about his salary for his work among them.

Paul points out that other apostles are paid for their work. And that is how it should be. Soldiers get paid; farmers get paid; those who work for the gospel should also get paid.

Paul then reminds the Corinthians (in case they have forgotten) that HE received no salary. He supported himself through his profession as a tentmaker. He is free. He is not obligated to them at all. His obligation is to Christ.

And this obligation to Christ is the root of why he preaches the gospel. He preaches the gospel because he cannot help himself. He preaches not for the money. He preaches because of his great love for the gospel.

And that brings us to our reading for today. In this reading, Paul explains that he is between a rock and a hard place. He is darned if he does, darned if he doesn't. He can't help but to preach the gospel. It is what he does. He loves it. Preaching the gospel is an *obligation* that has been laid on him. He is not bragging about it. And if he does not preach the gospel, then God's judgement will descend upon him.

As long as he preaches the gospel freely and of his own volition, then his reward is always the joy of seeing lives changed, of seeing people understand and embrace the love that Christ has for them.

Then Paul lists three groups of people that he preaches to. He preaches to the Jews, to the non-Jews, and to those known as the weak. The weak are those newer Christians who lack spiritual maturity and confidence. Paul says that to the Jews he became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To the non-Jews, he became as one of

them in order to win them. To the weak, he became weak, so as to win them over to the gospel. It is here that he says, *I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.*

So, the question is: has Paul relinquished all personal boundaries to share the gospel message? Has he lost himself completely?

No. Although it makes buzzers go off in my head, Paul has not lost himself. *I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.*

Paul knows how to walk the walk. He knows how to talk the talk. *Being all things to all people* means that he is more than willing to meet people where they are at. He's not standing high on a pulpit demanding that people come to him. He is willing to go to them and speak their language. He can speak to the Jews, he can speak to the Gentiles, his ego is not so large that he can't speak to those who have not had a personal revelation from Jesus as he has.

Paul preaches the gospel without personal agenda, just the agenda of Christ.

In 1919, Irving Berlin wrote a song that included this line: "A pretty girl is like a melody that haunts you night and day." I believe that this is what Paul is trying to tell us here. Except that he's not talking about a pretty girl, but instead is talking about the faith. Our faith is like a melody that haunts us night and day. Faith is not being forced into a relationship with God. Faith is when God's love surrounds us like a song that gets stuck in our brains. It becomes part of our lives. It haunts us. We have to hum the tune. We have to let it out. That is why Paul preached the gospel. It was his life. It was his passion.

And that is the question I leave with you today. When it comes to serving God, what is your passion? What drives you, inspires you? What encourages and motivates you? What gets you moving even though you feel you can't go any further? What is it that makes you want to testify the love and compassion of God to the world?