Sermon Summary for 1-November-2009
1 Corinthians 9:19-27 / "The Church and 'The Others'"

>> From the Bible
19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To 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. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.
24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. 25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

>> Notes

In general, this passage is about a Christian's view of "the others" — those outside the church. This passage is fairly familiar to people in the church. As a result it has taken on a varied host of meanings and interpretations. So it is wise to understand some nuances about the context of this passage.

When Paul talks about "becoming all things to all people," we need to understand there is a difference between function and disposition. In the most direct sense, Paul is speaking about his role as an apostle. As an apostle (one who has seen Christ and is called by him), Paul is speaking about what he must do for the sake of full-time ministry. Paul's office and calling was to start churches and build churches up. So how he "becomes all things to all people" is functionally different than how a non-ordained Christian understands this. Depending on your station in life, gifting, opportunity, etc., this calling in vs. 22 will look different for you than compared with someone else. So in terms of how this verse plays out functionally, day-in and day-out, we cannot make a universal application.

However, in terms of disposition (i.e. how we face those outside the church, the things that we expect and pray for in the church), it is universal in application. This gets at the question, "what should be our view of 'the others' — those outside the church"

The first thing we learn in this passage is that the gospel and culture are related, but still distinct from one another. Gospel and culture are doing commerce with one another. Paul summarizes this idea in vs. 22. Paul is talking about the "gospel delivery system." The gospel will inevitably be couched in cultural terms. It would be naïve to think that we can hear and receive the Bible and the message of the gospel in a cultural vacuum. *The gospel is about the Word made flesh. There can never a culture-free gospel. Yet the gospel, which is from the beginning to the end embodied in culturally conditioned forms, calls into question all cultures, including the one from it was originally embodied.* (Leslie Newbigin). Even as Jesus spoke during his earthly ministry, what he said and how he said it where influenced by the culture he was in. However, he spoke against cultural aspects that where in opposition to the gospel.

See vs 20-21. These verses reveal how Paul was working within two different cultures — Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles). Paul is able to embrace the cultural trappings of these groups in order to be intelligible to each of the groups. He does this in order that he might challenge their cultural taboos (like eating meat sacrificed to idols, etc.).

In our own church, we have a conviction to make the gospel culturally fluent to those who are not familiar with traditional church. Paul says that he becomes culturally fluent for the sake

of “saving from.” He adapted the cultural forms in order to warn people about the trappings of their cultural forms. So this is our challenge: are we embracing the form of culture with the goal of saving people from it? Or have we ourselves been given over to our culture? Yes, a church can become so insulated from the world that we become culturally unintelligible. But our church is more in a position to flatter the culture — we can tend to forget the imperative of “saving from.”

We all accept the fact that culture changes. We often look back at our past and easily see how ideals of humor, fashion, and ethics have changed. However, it is much difficult to recognize how culture effects how we communicate the gospel. It is easy for churches to become locked into a certain cultural frequency.

See vs. 22. Paul adds another category here: “the weak.” But notice there is no corollary here (e.g. “and to the strong I became strong”) as with previous categories. Also, he does not say, “I took on the trappings of the weak, or the forms of the weakness.” Rather he says plainly that he became weak in order to reach the weak. Paul’s weakness was the issue of him not taking pay for his ministry. He was not a ministry rockstar. His platform skills were not the best. But Paul makes the case that this weakness is the whole point. The foundation of the gospel is that we take on the same attitude as Christ — which is one of humility and weakness (see Php 2).

Often our problem with culture is really a problem with strength and weakness. As a church, when we lock into a cultural frequency, it is because we are striving for strength. We can implicitly think “we’re more culturally hip or together than you.” We find our comfort and our hope in the supposed strength or superiority of our cultural-informed message.

Taking on the weakness Christ is a real challenge for us. It’s not only a foreign concept in society, but unfortunately in the Church as well. But this is really one of the foundational aspects of the gospel. We do not come to one in another from positions of strength, but from one of brokenness and weakness that highlights and accentuates our dependance on Christ alone. We begin to be able to boast more and more in our weakness so that Christ’s power may rest on us.

>> Questions for Discussion

- In what ways do you find yourself resting in certain aspects of culture as if they were the gospel? What do you believe is being promised to you in those aspects of culture? What tends to be your reaction when these cultural comfort zones are challenged?

- Look at a parallel statement Paul makes in 1 Tim. 1:15-16 about how he is the foremost of sinners. Think about the usual chief of sinners in our culture: child molesters, murderers, and racists. Paul is saying he is beneath even these, and is yet an apostle of the Church. How does this sit with you? How might this affect your own fears of being exposed, found-out, or humiliated?

- Why does the Church still tend to demand strength and competence as ultimate values (especially in it’s leaders)? What does this demand for strength say about our true sense of self (i.e. do we really believe we are the worst of sinners?) What does this demand say about our true reliance on Christ alone (i.e. maybe I pitch in just a little)? How could you this week begin to love people out of your weakness rather than trying to show a pretense of strength? Why might that actually be more encouraging to others?