

When you think about the Apostle Paul, what do you imagine him to be like? Do you think of the man sitting in prison writing letters to the churches he founded? Do you think of the missionary taking the Gospel to gentiles? Do you think of Paul with his companion Silas, in jail singing praises until the earth shook and the doors of the prison opened? These are all images that come to my mind when I think of the Apostle Paul. You may have some others as well.

In order to understand our reading from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians today, it is helpful to keep in mind a bit of Paul's background. He was not always the faithful minister of the Gospel that we so often imagine. Before Paul changed his name, he was Saul the Pharisee. If there was anyone in all of Israel who could boast of his religious achievements, it was Saul. He was a student of Gamaliel, one of the two leading theologians of the day. He was the son of a Pharisee. He was so zealous for what he believed to be orthodox Judaism that he relentlessly persecuted the followers of Jesus. There were many in the church who trembled at his name. The Book of Acts says that Paul oversaw the murder of the disciple Stephen. Saul approved the first martyrdom of the Christian Church.

I doubt Paul ever lost sight of the fact that he did not deserve the encounter he had with Jesus on the road to Damascus, when Jesus revealed himself to Paul. I doubt he ever forgot Stephen's death. He admits, in his letters that he had fiercely opposed the spread of the Gospel of Christ, his Savior. Paul did not deserve to be saved, but Jesus saved him anyway.

In our reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians today, Paul writes that he is under an obligation to freely proclaim the Gospel to everyone. He writes, "If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!" This obligation rose from God's choice to bring Paul face to face with the truth of the Gospel of Christ.

If Paul had been able to earn his way into the Kingdom of Heaven, if all of his righteous observance of the law brought him to the knowledge of Christ, then there would have been no obligation laid on him. Because Paul did not choose Christ on his own, but accepted Christ's choice of him, he was obliged to spread the Gospel by which he had been saved himself. This will be very important in what Paul says next.

Each of us has a back story of how God chose us. Were you raised in the church, hearing the proclamation of the Gospel as far back as you can remember? Would you say that you can never remember a time when you did not trust Jesus? Then praise God. He chose to give you to parents who raised you with the Gospel. You had nothing to do with the choice of your parents. Rather, you came to the Gospel by God's choice of who would raise you.

Is your past a bit more like Paul's? Were you going your own way? Did you think that the followers of Jesus had it all wrong, or perhaps never gave much thought at all to Jesus? Then praise God, at some point God chose to bring you face to face with the Gospel. He chose you. At the moment, it may have felt like you were looking for Him, but before you ever began seeking He was at work to bring you to Himself. If you look back over your life prayerfully, you will be able to see that. We did not choose Christ. He chose us. All we did was say, "yes," to what He was doing to bring us to Himself.

Because God freely chose us in Christ Jesus, an obligation is laid on us. If we proclaim the Gospel, this gives us no ground for boasting. Woe be to us if we do not proclaim the Gospel! This does not mean that we will all be exactly like Paul. Most of us are not called to travel around the world, planting churches, speaking in public squares, and challenging various authorities. However, we are all obliged to share the Gospel in some way, right where we are.

Paul's response to this obligation was to say, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." When he was with Jews, with those under the law, he observed Jewish customs. He no longer observed all of the requirements of Judaism in order to find favor in the eyes of God. He knew he had the right to live more freely. But if he was in a Jewish community, he would do things like observe the Sabbath faithfully. I don't think any of us have any idea how difficult it can be to observe the Sabbath in the way that Paul would have observed it. There are volumes in the Talmud discussing what you may and may not do on the Sabbath.

Paul gave up his right to be more relaxed in observing the Sabbath so that his way of life would not become a hindrance to the Gospel of Christ. He could have demanded his rights. He could have said, "I don't have to be so burdened, because, in Christ I have been set free from all of that." Instead, he set aside his freedom for the sake of the Gospel so that he could share that Gospel with those who observed the law.

When Paul was with Gentiles, those outside the law, he did not observe all of the Jewish customs. He probably ate things that, as a child, he never would have dreamed of eating. Eating pork does not sound like much of a hardship to us, but imagine if you were in one of the countries where dog was on the menu. I don't know about you, but I would have a hard time eating dog. But if Paul refused to eat foods that weren't kosher, it might turn someone against the Gospel. It was his right to refuse to eat something that might make him squirm, but if it conflicted with his obligation to make the Gospel freely available to all, then he would lay aside that right.

When Paul said he had become all things to all people, he was not saying that anything goes. There were limits. He was under the law of Christ. He was saying that he was ready to lay aside his rights, his personal preferences, for the sake of the Gospel. The spread of the Gospel was more important than his own comfort.

Are we willing to become all things to all people in that sense? I have the right to post all kinds of political messages on my Facebook page during this election cycle, but I will not post anything that might unnecessarily alienate someone from the Gospel of Christ. If I've shared the Gospel with someone, then post some vitriolic attack on their favorite candidate, woe be to me. We have the right to demand that the liturgy and the service conform to our personal preferences, but woe be to us if people think the Gospel is stale and outdated because we get hung up on keeping everything exactly as it was at a point in time that stirs nostalgic feelings for us. We have the right to hang on to 90 percent of our income for ourselves. But woe be to us if our desire for more gadgets, or another meal at a favorite restaurant means that a missionary must leave the field.

Paul did not talk about surrendering his rights to provoke guilt among the Corinthian Church. He wanted them to see what motivated him. He wanted them to keep eternity in view. Paul knew that he was building a share in the Gospel of Christ. At the resurrection, there would be people who were raised to eternal life because he was willing to lay aside his rights for the sake of his obligation to proclaim the Gospel.

Do we have eternity in view? At the resurrection, will there be those who are there because we were willing to lay aside our rights? It may cause some discomfort now, but won't it be worth it when we see that we have had a share in what God is doing? Could there be anything more joyful than recognizing those who have been raised to eternal life because we were willing to become all things to all people so that by all means we might win some?