For the Sake of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 9:1-27

Key Verse: 9:23 “I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

Before Paul met the Risen Jesus and was converted, he was a very self-righteous man. He even approved when Steven was stoned to death. But since he was converted, he became a completely different person. He was a gentle, humble, mindful, and compassionate apostle. In chapter 8 Paul taught us how to deny our freedom and rights for the sake of others, especially for those whose conscience is weak. He said that if we cause others to stumble, we are sinning against God. (8:11-12) In chapter 9 Paul teaches us another example of how to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the gospel.

First, woe to me if I do not preach the gospel. (1-18) In the previous chapters we came to know that there were divisions among the believers in Corinth Church. Even though the church was founded by Paul, there were some who stood against Paul’s authority and his apostleship. They dissed Paul saying that Paul was not one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. So, some followed Apollos while others Cephas, Peter. Paul began to defend his apostleship. Look at verses 1-2. “***Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.***” Two things Paul mentioned here for his apostleship are that his apostleship came from the Lord Jesus directly and that the church members were the fruit (result) of his apostleship. In verses 3-12 Paul claims his basic rights as human beings such as eating and drinking whatever he wanted. (4) He also had a right to marry and establish a family as Cephas or other brothers did. (5) He mentioned the basic rights of soldiers, farmers, and shepherds. Soldiers do not serve at their own expense but are supported by their government. Farmers have the right to eat its grapes while they plant a vineyard. Shepherds can drink some milk because they tend a flock. (7) Even the Scripture approves animals’ right to eat for their work. Deuteronomy 25:4 says, “***Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.***” (8)

Indeed Paul had the rights to receive material support from the church as the gospel worker and their shepherd. In verses 10-12 Paul compares himself as a farmer who sows the seed and expects harvest. As the farmer in the church planting Paul had the right to receive material support from the church. But what did he say about this? Look at verse 12 b. “***But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ***.” For the sake of the gospel Paul gave up all these basic human rights. In verses 13-14 he claims that he also had priestly rights. In the temple priests have rights to eat food from the temple. Those who serve at the altar could share what was offered on that altar. In the same way Paul had the right to use some contribution or materials for his ministry or other good purpose. But Paul said that he gave up such priestly rights for the sake of the gospel. Paul gave up his freedom and rights for the sake of the gospel. He said in verse 12b that he put up with all things rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. He also said that he became all things to all people for the sake of the gospel.

Then, what is the gospel which made Paul like this? The word ‘gospel’ in Greek is good news. Gospel is the good news of salvation based on the story of Jesus Christ. In short gospel is that Jesus died for our sins on the cross and rose again from the dead. (1 Co 15:3,4) What is good news for you today? Your good news is like a soccer game between Chelsea and Tottenham or Cardinals and Cubs. Your good news is conditional and temporal. They will not last long. But the good news of Jesus Christ is a great joy for all people for all generations. It is summarized in John 3:16. “*For God so loved the world that he gave his One and Only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life*.” For the last several years we have suffered from ‘Covid-19’, and many people around the world died of this disease. Now many people are dying from the war between Russia and Ukraine. In America many people have died and are dying from gun violence and other crimes. Why do we have to suffer and die? The Bible says that this is the price of sin. Sin is a separation from God. The price of sin is death. (Ro 6:23) We have to pay the price of our sins.

But God loves this world. God loves you and me and that he sent his One and Only Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins. God punished Jesus in our place so that we may be freed from the price of sin. Jesus paid the price of our sin by his blood and we are saved from eternal punishment, and that we have eternal life as the gift of God. Jesus rose again from the dead and went to heaven. He promised to come again to take us to his kingdom to be with him forever. (Jn 14:3) We will be with him forever in his kingdom. This is the good news to Paul and to us today. Confess your sin and receive the forgiveness of your sin through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen!

Next, he did so because he expected the heavenly reward. Look at verses 15-18. “***But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.***” Here we focus on the word ‘reward’. Paul did not expect reward from this world, reward from the church or reward from his people, but reward from heaven, reward from Jesus Christ. For the sake of the heavenly reward, he was willing to give up all these earthly rights and rewards. For the sake of the heavenly reward, he preached the gospel free of charge.

Paul said, “*Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*” Paul remembered how God saved his life from the slavery of sin. In the past he was ignorant and rebellious. He rejected Jesus and persecuted his church. But since he believed the gospel, he was changed. When he thought about this grace of salvation, he was compelled to preach the gospel, the message of salvation. When he thought about the debt which was paid off by the blood of Jesus, he felt woeful unless he preached the gospel. Do you remember the grace of God? Do you make such a confession as Paul did? “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel?”

Second, Paul became all things to all men. (19-23) Paul had many reasons to make himself proud. He introduced himself to the believers in Philippi Church, “*circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.*” (Php 3:5-6) But what did he say in verse 19. “***Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible***.” He said that he made himself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible. He continued that he acted like a Jew to win the Jews. He became a gentile to win the gentiles. (20-21) How could such a proud Jewish young man become like this? Why did Paul make himself nothing? Look at verses 22-23. “***To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.***” Paul could do so for the sake of the gospel. He made himself nothing to save people as many as possible.

It is not easy to become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel. Missionary Sarah Barry went to Korea in 1957 and stayed in the missionary compound in Kwangju Korea. At that time Korean students were afraid of approaching a foreigner who had blue eyes and spoke in different language. To win these Korean students she moved from the missionary compound to a rented house and made herself dwelling with them. She learned Korean. She ate rice and kimchi to make friends with them. Many college students came to her to study the Bible and English. It was the starting point of UBF church worldwide. When she came back to USA after 20 years missionary life in Korea, I heard that she never ate kimchi again. We realize how she denied herself and struggled to become a Korean to win Korean students. I believe that Paul did the same struggle as Missionary Sarah Barry did. Paul was brought up under strict dietary law. More than anyone else he knew what he had to eat and not to eat according to the law. But in modern term Paul ate German sausage to win Germans. He ate Kimchi to win Koreans. Paul said that he became all things to all men to save all of them.

Let us remember Jesus who made himself nothing to save Paul. John 1:14 says that the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. This means that the Creator God who made heavens and the earth appeared as a mere man. God made himself nothing to be with his people. The Incarnate God taught the kingdom of God to his people in limited human language. Finally, he died on the cross for the sake of his people. This is the gospel. Paul describes this in Philippians 2:6-8, “*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on the cross.*” Are you ready and willing to sacrifice all things for the sake of the gospel? Can you make yourself nothing to save people? Can you become all things to all people to save them? It is not easy because it requires strict training and discipline.

Third, go into strict training (24-27) Paul compares Christians to runners and boxers who compete to win the prize. Look at verses 24-25. “***Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way so to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever***.” The difference between ordinary runners and Christians is the nature of a prize. They run for a crown which will not last. We Christians run for a crown which lasts forever. But the process to get the prize for both is the same: go into strict training. Look at verse 26. “***Therefore***, ***I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.***” We know how athletes go into strict training to compete in the Olympics. They beat their bodies to control weight and improve their skill and stamina. They do this because they have a goal which is to win the gold medal.

We struggle and go into strict discipline for the sake of the gospel. To win college students, some senior missionaries dye their hair and wear jeans like teenage. When I was in Chicago, I and other young missionaries took a language course to correct our pronunciation so that we can speak in English like a native Americans. If we pronounced wrong, we had to pay the penalty. I learned how to deny myself, to make myself nothing and to become all men to all people for the sake of the gospel. How about you? How much do you struggle for the sake of the gospel?

In conclusion, woe to me unless I preach the gospel. I pray that this message may apply not only to me, but also to all of you who were bought at the price of the blood of Jesus. Grace and apostleship came from the Lord Jesus. We need confidence and obedience to God’s grace and his gift.