

# **1 Corinthians 9:19-27** 12-02-07

## ***Contextualization: Missions & Culture***

When we talk about missionaries we generally think of those that live in another country who desire to win foreigners to Christ. In their pursuit they try to fit into that culture as much as possible. They try to learn the language; they try to dress in a way that is culturally relevant; they involve themselves with local customs or festivals, and they even desire to eat the same foods. The hope of missionaries is simply to conform to their culture as much as possible to win some to Jesus.

I used to think that mission work was reserved for those who felt called of God—like the Peggy Giles' of the world. There were times when I would get frustrated if an entire service was dedicated to missions. I figured I wasn't called to missions. I had no desire to live among natives in a foreign country. I liked being a westerner and living in the states. It was great. I remember several years ago I went on a mission's trip to Rosa Rita, Mexico. I had a hard time. The smell. The wild dogs that would bark all night. Not being able to flush toilet paper down the toilet. Not being able to drink the water. I did not like the dusty dirt roads, and most importantly—not being able to communicate with the natives. I knew from that experience I was not called to be a missionary and to be quite honest—I was a little relieved. I much preferred the states. So when missionaries spoke at my church back home; there was a little bit of a let down for me. ....Then I repented.

You see, I had a shallow and very narrow idea of what a missionary was. I thought it was only for those who were called to the mission field and that I needed to live abroad.....That wasn't me! Then I read this passage and began to study Missional churches who are engaging their culture and growing big time. The reality is that eighty percent of churches are in decline and each year roughly 3,500 churches close their doors. In addition, today there seems to be an even bigger gap between the church and our culture. So if the church is in decline and we don't attract new converts—something is wrong with way we do church.

But I want to suggest to you a new approach to missions today. One that will involve both the pastor and the congregation. We both have to understand the importance of being a missionary to our culture. My hope is that you will feel convicted like me; this is where my heart is at. Let's read.

***19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.***

### **1. Winning Others to Christ begins with Personal and Intentional Commitment**

If you remember last week Paul said that he was free to receive compensation from the church. It wasn't just his opinion; it was also a biblical mandate. Jesus said the laborer for the Lord is worthy of his wage. But Paul said that though compensation was his right; he chose not to exercise it. Though he was free to receive a wage; he did not want to because it would be a stumbling block to the church at Corinth. In this section; Paul continues his freedom discourse. What he means here by freedom is that he doesn't have to adopt the cultural convictions of the people he ministers to. He doesn't have to become like others to win people. He doesn't have to sacrifice his lifestyle to preach the gospel. But for the sake of others he won't exercise that freedom. Instead he will become a slave to the people he ministers to. He will respect their cultural convictions.

Paul had the kind of mind that was always thinking of how he could lead more people to Christ. He was obsessed with the notion of others coming to Christ. I can see him waking up each morning and praying to God: "Oh God—please give me with an opportunity today to share Christ with someone." It was his desire.

There has to be a desire. All one has to do is talk to people and they will share their desires. Some have a desire to make money. The majority of their time is thinking and finding ways to make more money. Then once they make money—the next goal is to have more money than the next guy. Some have the desire to be happy. They tend to think of ways to accomplish happiness. They look for happiness in relationships. In material possessions. In helping the

needy. In academic degrees. In family relationships. The general thought is that if only this would happen; I would be happy. Trying to find happiness is like a dog chasing its tail. You will become weary.

If you are going to desire something—there is no better ambition than to desire that those within your sphere of influence would know Christ. That is an eternal desire. That's the desire he has enslaved himself to. Next he illustrates how he has become a slave.

***20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. 23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.***

## **2. To Win Others to Christ; You Must Learn how to Adapt to their Culture**

This was the heart of Paul. In his church he had both Jews and Gentiles—people who had very different lifestyles. So Paul became a missionary to each sub culture. Many times we think of missionaries as people who work exclusively overseas. People who are sent to live among a culture. Unfortunately, that is a narrow view of missions. Missions are not only abroad—but it is also right here in your own neck of the woods.

With Paul—when he was around Jews—he blended into their culture as much as possible. He didn't eat hot dogs or ham sandwiches. He washed his hands and dishes before he ate. He talked about the Law and the events of the Old Testament. He dressed in a way that reflected their culture. He did as much as possible to blend in.

It was the same with the Gentiles. He associated with them over a meal—which was traditionally unacceptable as a Jew. He probably ate hotdogs and ham sandwiches. He ate food without washing his hands. He went to some of their entertainment outlets like the theater, the bath houses, the chariot races, the Olympic Games. He read up on their religious beliefs. He listened to their poetry—their music. He made those he was with feel as comfortable as possible. He blended in.

With the weak—that is, those who were weak in conscience—he respected their convictions. What does that mean for you? If someone doesn't want to eat meat; order some tofu with a lot of ketchup. If someone has an issue with alcohol—drink root beer or Kool-Aid. If someone feels guilty about dancing—wait until another time to cut up the carpet and bust a move. If someone hates the Beavers—watch the Husky game—they have better uniforms anyway. If someone doesn't like Rambo, then watch Rocky. If someone doesn't like Michael Jackson—play some Donny Osmond. Consciously make a decision not to offend people with weak consciences. That's one way you become a missionary to your culture.

## **Objections:**

But aren't we supposed to be separate from the world? This is something that has been taught in churches either subtly or overtly. There are churches that go so far as not to clap when someone performs a song in the church. Clapping they were taught—glorifies the performer—not God. That is worldly

Other churches consider things like alcohol, dancing, secular music, and dating as worldly. The underlying message is that we are not supposed to be worldly. There was actually a church that prohibited fishing on Sundays because it was seen as worldly. But here is an important distinction. There is a difference between culture and worldliness. Culture is where you live. It involves the customs and practices of a culture. Worldliness, however, is sin. These are blatant philosophies, behaviors, and lifestyles that are opposed and in rebellion against God. In the Bible, worldliness includes disbelief in God, sexual immorality, drunkenness, gossiping, not honoring your parents, idolatry, etc., etc. What it does

not include is drinking a glass of wine with your dinner, going out dancing, listening to secular music, etc., etc. Those are aspects of our culture.

In John 17, Jesus even prayed, *“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.”* Jesus is our model when it comes to integrating with our culture. He went to weddings where there was alcohol, and most likely music, and dancing, he ate dinner with sinners, and he healed people like lepers—who were the outcasts of society. He engaged culture. He became a part of his culture. At the same time—he did not sin. He was attractive to people because he became a part of their immediate culture.

How far should one go to blend into their culture? As far as possible without sinning. If the Bible calls it a sin then it is a sin. You don't participate. If something is illegal you don't participate. We are under the authority of our civil governments. What does that look like? If someone wants you to drink alcohol and you are under age—don't drink it. If someone wants you to smoke pot with them—don't smoke it—regardless of what those ex-hippies of the Woodstock area say. It is against the law! Bottom line, it is against the law. If someone wants you to go to strip clubs or watch pornography with them—don't engage in those lustful activities. Know the Bible and know the law. Those are your parameters.

Being of the world is worldliness. That is sin.

Integrating with the culture is biblical: That is Jesus.

You just have to establish biblical boundaries.

The next objection:

**What if there are cultural practices that bother my conscience** like drinking, listening to secular music, or dancing. Paul addressed this in chapter eight. Don't sin against your conscience or cause another to sin against their conscience. You don't have to drink beer; you can have a Pepsi. You don't have to go to a bar—you can go to a restaurant. You don't have to go dancing—you can watch MTV.

Finally

**What if I just don't have the energy to engage my culture?** That is something for the younger folks. Yes, there are some people who would be more effective going to the college campuses or the streets and engaging the culture. However, that does not mean you can't entertain your unbelieving friends or family—that's also a sub-culture. They need Jesus. The key is being intentional. Have super bowl parties; watch the Civil War together with these folks. Invite them over for dinner. Find a hobby you both can do together. If an unbelieving family member or friend has kids, offer to baby sit them. The key here is to be intentional.

Honestly—that is the only way Northside Church will grow. We have to become intentional. It has to become a priority. We need to pray that like Jesus—we can look at Corvallis and weep. Weep because there are some nice decent folks who don't know Jesus and they are not going to make it to heaven. They are headed for that other place.

And honestly—before we can learn to weep we need to repent. I am going to say a prayer and after wards, there will be a time of silence. If reaching people for Jesus has not been a priority in your life—use that quiet time to repent. This is between you and God.

**24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. 25 Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; 27 but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.**

### **3. Live your Christian Life with Purpose and Direction**

Paul is using an analogy here. The first thing you have to do is enter the race. Make it a point to be a missionary for Christ. Two, Run the race to win. Run to win people to Christ. Three: Demonstrate self control like an athlete. In other words, engage the culture—but don't engage worldliness. Make yourself a slave so you can lead people to Jesus. Have a purpose and direction in your Christian walk. Don't walk aimlessly and beat the air.

Lastly, the best example of engaging the culture is Jesus. He is our hero. Jesus came from heaven where everything was perfect. He worshipped his father, he lived with the angels, and he lived in a paradise where there was no sin. Why would you want to leave that Christian environment? Why would he want to become human like us? Why would he socialize with us? Why would he hang out with sinners like us? Because he wanted to win as many people as possible to Him. He wanted people to be saved. If he doesn't leave his heavenly culture—we never hear the gospel and we go to hell because of sin. In this passage, Paul is just following the example of Jesus. He is also teaching us to follow the example of Jesus. In the end, Jesus is our hero. He came to earth—lived a sinless life, and died for our sins. He contextualized our culture so much he actually tasted death. But then he was raised from the dead. All you had to do is believe he is your Savior. My hope is that likewise—we will take chances with our culture so they can experience heaven with us.