

The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians

Freely Enslaved to All

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

1. The Goal of Enslavement (v.19)

Paul has chosen a life of perpetual enslavement to the people to whom God has sent him. Paul's use of his freedom is primarily and continually for the potential benefit of others and not for his own comfort and ease. His goal is for the salvation of sinners (cf. 1 Tim 1:15-16).

2. The Practice of Enslavement (vs.20-22)

Paul is not giving an exhaustive list of every possible permutation of how he could enslave himself evangelistically to others. Each of the descriptions listed would be applied to different people inside of the Corinthian church.

A. Jews (v.20)

Paul was a Jew, and he would always be a Jew, so that Paul said he "became as a Jew" it would be referring to the social and cultural practices of the Jews. He was not normally in the habit of defaulting to living as a Jew (cf. Gal. 2:13), but he was willing to make that concession for the sake of the gospel.

B. Under the Law (v.20)

This is largely the same as the becoming "as a Jew". If a distinction is intended, one possibility is that it could have been referring to those who were gentile converts to Judaism. However, a better distinction is that observed some of the religious customs and proprieties of the Jews when he was evangelizing in the synagogue even if that resulted in thirty-nine lashes (2 Cor. 11:24; cf. Deut. 25:1-3; Acts 23:5).

C. Without Law (v.21)

Paul's habit among the gentiles was to live a gentile who was not under the rigorous requirements of the Law (cf. Gal. 2:14). This did not mean that he was living immorally or sinfully (cf. 1 John 3:4), but that he was not bound to observe all of the distinctive Jewish ceremonies and customs. He never behaved as one who was untethered from God because His entire life was anchored in the law of Christ (cf. Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; Jam. 1:25; 2:8, 12).

D. Weak (v.22)

It is possible that this is a reference to the overall description of the majority of the Corinthian church in the eyes of their own culture (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27). But most likely it is Paul's way of tying this evangelistic activity directly back to the issue of freedom (cf. 1 Cor. 8:7, 9, 10).

3. The Reason for Enslavement (v.23)

Paul restates that his purpose in enslaving himself to others is for the furtherance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Rather than be a hindrance to someone's salvation and sanctification (cf. 1 Cor. 8:9), he wants to be used of the Lord to aid them toward these goals (cf. 1 Cor. 3:6).