

## 'All Things to All Men'

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A reader has written in asking: Please explain 1 Cor. 9:20, where Paul says that, "to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law."

This text affords a good illustration of the fact that no scripture can be perfectly understood if torn out of its setting. This one has been misunderstood, and perverted, and very seldom has anyone learned from it that which it was designed to teach. While studying it together for a few minutes we may not only get the valuable instruction that it contains, but we may learn something about how to study the Bible for ourselves.

In the first place, we must banish from our minds, as wholly out of keeping with the character of the Apostle Paul, the idea that he meant that he was a turncoat, holding his principles and habits subject to the various people with whom he associated. The common saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," is often quoted to justify conformity to worldly customs when associating with worldly people. There is no authority in the writings of Paul for this kind of behavior.

In first Corinthians chapter eight we are taught by the apostle's own example to be careful of offending the consciences of the weak. He is not talking about conforming to customs that others follow, but of abstaining even from lawful things that they may be troubled over. Those who are so fearful of offending people by their religion should make a note of this. It is by self-denial, rather than joining in the things that other people indulge in, that we win them.

In 1 Corinthians 9:14, we find that although the minister of the Gospel has the right to receive money, and it is ordained that "those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel," the Apostle Paul did not take anything from the Corinthians, but supported himself while preaching among them. (See also Acts 18:1-4). He says that "those who serve at the altar partake of *the offerings of the altar*," "but I have used none of these things;" "for it *would be* better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void." He preached the Gospel willingly, yet such necessity was laid on him that he would have been compelled to preach even if he had been unwilling. This is in harmony with his words, "I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. So, as much as is in me, *I am* ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also" (Rom. 1:14, 15). Paul felt that what he had received from Christ made him a debtor to all men. So he continues: —

"What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel. For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law; to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:18-22).

Reading further we see that Paul is speaking of self-denial, and not of conforming to other people's evil habits. He says: —

“Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with *you*. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain *it*. And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for* an imperishable *crown*. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as *one who* beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:23-27).

Read the entire connection carefully, and you cannot fail to see that here we have the illustration of the exhortation, given through the same apostle: “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Paul was free from all men, free with the liberty that Christ gives, yet he would not be a lord over God's heritage, but chose rather to be the servant of all. In this he was following Christ, who was “born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal. 4:4, 5). Christ puts Himself into every man's place, taking upon Himself the burden of each one's sin, in order that all may be saved. Even so His ambassadors must do. Although delivered and kept from sin, we must, like our Master, be able to meet every sinner just where he is, and sympathize with him. Having learned the plague of our own heart and having been delivered from it; having learned the weakness of humanity, and the power of Divinity; we know that the sins of all men reside in our flesh, and knowing this we may make others know the power that saves. Thus we are indeed all things to all men, not in such a way as to make them think that their ways are right, but in a way that some will be able to forsake their ways, and turn to the Lord.

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