

Stretching and Sharing in Gospel Joy

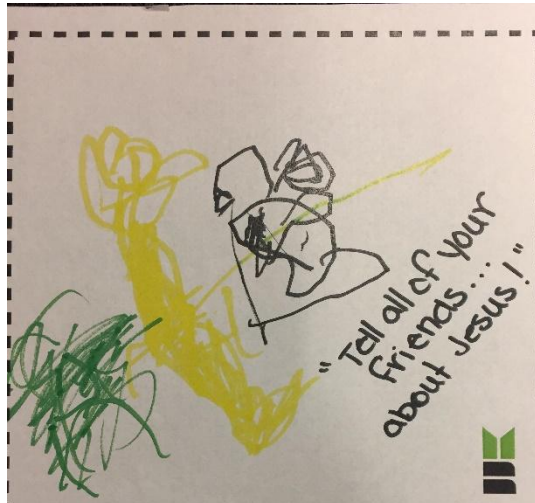
1 Corinthians 9:19-25

December 3, 2017
Steve DeWitt

This past week our Kids' Ministry asked our kids to identify what they wanted to be when they grew up. As you may guess, there were some interesting answers.



When I grow up I want to be a
doctor (children)
that serves Jesus.



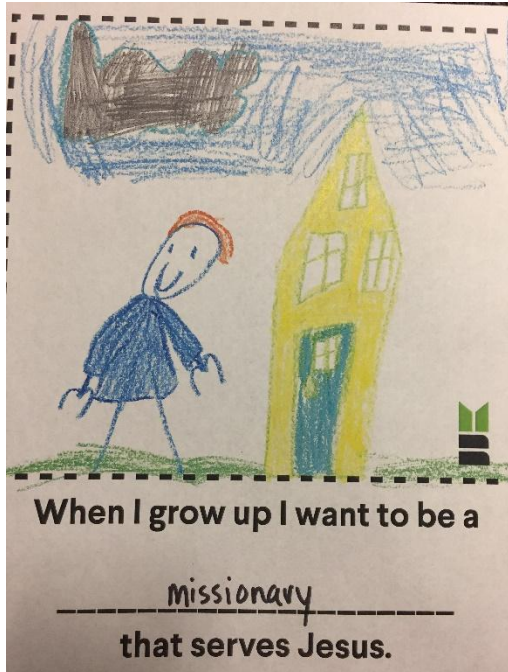
When I grow up I want to be a
Batman
that serves Jesus.



When I grow up I want to be a
Dentist
that serves Jesus.



When I grow up I want to be a
Paleontologist
that serves Jesus.



We want our kids to think about the future. The future them. If you want to be a _____ then you better start doing _____ now. If you want something to be true for you tomorrow, you'd better do what it takes today.

It works the same way in our spiritual lives and our eternal futures. As Christians, what we do now impacts the future through ministry and eternal reward from Christ. If you are not a Christian, this doesn't presently apply to you. Jesus' word for you is to realize his love for you as a sinner and to receive his free offer of forgiveness of sins available because of his death on the cross. Repent. Believe. And receive eternal life in his name.

I am mostly addressing Christians today as 1 Corinthians was written to a church that chronically thought insignificant things were important and missed the really important; the eternally important. Paul puts his own life forward as an example of a life

lived by gospel priorities and eternal realities.

"For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." (1 Corinthians 9:19-25 ESV)

Paul states that he is free from all. This flows out of the preceding verses where he explains that while he has a right to monetary support for gospel ministry, he has chosen to supply his own material needs. He made tents and sold them. By doing this he was not beholden to anyone. He was "free" from all.

Lest that sound like he is using this freedom selfishly, he explains his motive is the opposite of that. By not being financially dependent on anyone, he is free to become whatever is needed to reach everyone.

"I have made myself a servant to all." Nothing binds him but his own desire for gospel effectiveness. Why? *"That I might win more of them."* Win what? More what? "Win" is not competitive but evangelistic. Paul wants more and more people to share his joy in finding salvation in Christ. I would have to think Paul would be pretty excited about the **More** part of our *More + Better campaign*. Yes, more. Many, many more!

But how? Paul explains his cultural flexibility to build bridges with people in the religious diversity of his day. I won't reread all of it, but you will notice his descriptive list. 1) Jews. 2) "Those under the law." 3) "Those outside the law." 4) And the weak.

The Jews were ethnic Jews. "Those under the law" are those who are not just ethnic Jews but Jews practicing Judaism. "Those outside the law" were the Gentiles and it refers to those religiously practicing something far different from Judaism. Think of Paul at Mars Hill (Acts 17) with the Greek philosophers as an example of his ministry to those outside the law. "Those outside the law" is nearly everybody we are trying to reach. They aren't Orthodox Jews practicing an Old Testament law; they are outside the law and live as if there is no law. This explains so much of the news these past few weeks and our society's difficult moral dilemma of condemning sexual impropriety without any real moral foundation to do so. There's something inside them that says *that's wrong*. The ancient conscience is alive and well. Our society tries to retain a moral framework while denying the existence of a moral God. They are outside the law and Paul built bridges with them outside the law. "To the weak he became weak." This contextually is the previous chapter and describes those heavily influenced by pagan temple worship prior to their Christianity. He flexes to their perspective and experience to build bridges.

His summary is the brilliant verse 22, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." Paul isn't saying that anything goes, and we can compromise any doctrine or principle. The whole letter is largely a rebuke of the Corinthian church for doing just that. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:8)

The true gospel will never change, and biblical doctrine is rooted in the unchanging character of God. The church is called to be the pillar and foundation of the truth. Pillars and foundations don't move. **1 Cor. 9 isn't about moving doctrinally toward the beliefs of the lost but rather moving relationally toward the hearts of the lost.** Even though Paul was an apostle, even an apostle is free to flex in approach and lifestyle in order to build bridges of relationship with a diversity of people in the world. Why? Paul gives three reasons for Christian cultural flexibility in making disciples.

Three Reasons for Christian Cultural Flexibility in Making Disciples

To win more (1 Corinthians 9:22)

"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some."

"Save some." Paul realized that in spite of our best efforts many will not believe and will reject Jesus. But humanly speaking, by stretching ourselves and flexing into the life and culture of anyone, God can and will use it to save some.

What price can we put on the eternal soul of any person? I've mentioned before a man I knew who was complaining about all the trouble in the world and my response to him was, "It's almost as if the world needs a Savior." That man died recently, and it rattled me. If we could just glimpse eternity, we would realize that the things we care so much about don't matter and the things we often overlook matter more than anything else. This calls us to go to them with language and love that speaks to their hearts rather than them accommodating us.

"He is not concerned with staying within his own "comfort zone," but about overemphasizing artificial barriers inhibiting those who have not yet responded to the gospel from coming into the life of Christ."¹

I recently was in our kids' wing one evening. I went into one room and I noticed a local bank executive. What made me notice was that he was on the ground crawling around ministering to the children still in his bank executive clothes. He had gone there directly from the office. Let me know when you go into a bank building and see an executive crawling around in his bank executive clothes with the children. It won't happen. But in the church there are no executives too high and mighty to not become like a child in order to reach more children. He went to their level.

I hope this truth is ringing in your heart. Setting aside personal comfort for gospel purposes sounds vaguely familiar. While not a Christmas message, isn't this the message of Christmas?

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:11-12)

Christ the Lord lying in a manger? What? Why? If the baby Jesus could have talked and those shepherds asked why, would he not have said, *"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some?"* (1 Corinthians 9:22) It would be a sad church that celebrates Jesus stretching to us at Christmas but won't flex themselves to reach their community.

To share in gospel blessing (1 Corinthians 9:23)

"I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."

What is Paul referring to here? The gospel has blessings, doesn't it? Think of everything we receive both now in terms of our new life in Christ and our future eternal blessings that boggle the mind. For Paul, the joy of sharing these blessings and sharing in these blessings with others was a powerful motivation.

As a parent I find this to be true. Things that I loved in my childhood I now want my daughters to experience. The first gift I gave to Kiralee her first Christmas was a basketball hoop with suction cups. It lets you shoot baskets in the bathtub. Why? I like basketball. To share that with her even on that level is a joy to me.

Basketball is a tiny thing compared to my desire to share eternity with God with her. The deepest longing in my heart above all others is that my daughters would share in my faith and future. I want to share forever with them in gospel blessings.

The more we love people the greater desire we have to share Jesus with them. Yes, family members and dear ones to us. But Jesus loves red and yellow black and white; they are all precious in his sight. We should love them too. Why? The joy of sharing in gospel blessings with them.

¹ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, p. 430.

To receive a reward (1 Corinthians 9:25)

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable." (1 Corinthians 9:24-25)

Corinth was the host city for the Isthmian Games. They rivaled the importance of the ancient Olympic Games in Athens. Corinth was a sport city and I think Paul might have been an ESPN sort of guy. He often uses athletics as illustrations in his writings. Here he refers to running. All the runners run but only one receives the prize. There's only one winner. Apparently in the first century there were no participation trophies.

What he highlights here is the exertion of the runners even in their training. They exercise self-control in all things. All other priorities and desires are submitted to the goal of winning. Think of runners pressing with all they have to the finish line (see picture below).



Paul makes his point. These athletes do what they do for a wreath. Or in our day, a medal or even for money. Same point. They show incredible effort for something that passes away.

Shouldn't we exert equal or greater effort for the eternal reward God promises to us for faithful and sacrificial effort to make disciples?

How about you? When it comes to gospel ministry or your spiritual walk, would you describe it all in terms of sweat or pushing yourself to finish line? How about our church as whole? Are we a sweaty, go for it, all in, group of Christians?

What is *More + Better*? It is many things, but it certainly is our church refusing to settle for the status quo. We are refusing to say, *Northwest Indiana? We have good and plenty disciples of Jesus here. We're in. We're good. Let's go. Take it easy. We've done enough.* I'm sure we could do so and remain a sizeable church, but guess what would happen? Slowly, perhaps imperceptibly, we would begin to die. Slowly the culture would become one of infighting about control or vision or whatever. The positive momentum we have now would become negative momentum.

What would Paul say? Be flexible. Keep trying new things. Do whatever you can by whatever means you can in order to save some.

This past week I met a pastor from the south side of Chicago. Great guy doing a great work. I asked him about his most influential author. He said, "John Piper and his book, *Don't waste Your Life.*" Great choice. Don't waste your life. What? You can waste your life? Yep. How?

- *"The wasted life is the life without a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples."*²

² John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, p. 31.

- *"The greatest cause in the world is joyfully rescuing people from hell, meeting their earthly needs, making them glad in God, and doing it with a kind, serious pleasure that makes Christ look like the Treasure he is."³*

Bethel, this is such a key moment for us. Will we press forward? Will *All About Him* propel us forward? Will we continue to strain for the finish line?

I am personally incredibly excited about our church and where we are going. I'm in with my heart, my dollars, and my prayers. *More + Better* is much more than simply financial support, but right now what we need is financial support. The days ahead will hopefully include launch teams and volunteers and calls for leadership and work days. But this day is not that day. This day asks, *will we get behind this with our finances?*

Part of the beauty of this is that supporting *More + Better* is an opportunity to invest in a variety of gospel efforts at one time. It's like a mutual fund with diverse investment in several categories. By giving to *More + Better* I'm supporting campus planting and possibly church planting. I'm supporting inner city kids' education and outreach. I'm creating capacity for young people to hear the gospel. I'm helping make room for more disciples to hear Bible preaching and participate in worship. I'm not just helping gospel ministry in one community but across the communities and people groups of Northwest Indiana. It would be hard to individually support so many wonderful things, but by supporting *More + Better*, I'm supporting all these things at once.

Why? Jesus. It's all about him. For the love of people. And to personally rejoice as my church and my dollars bear fruit. To think, when I hear of some teenager receiving Christ at Verge, I had skin in that game. When I see folks baptized who came under the hearing of gospel preaching and were saved, I had skin in that one too. When in the future a woman stands before us and shares her testimony through a translator in Spanish, Mandarin, or whatever, I'm so glad I have a small part in her eternal salvation.

As you pray and consider being a part of this, would you ask, *rather than wasting my dollars, might this be me doing something eternally significant so that by all means we might save some?* To God be the glory.

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³ John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, page unknown.