

UNEDITED DRAFT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today we're going to look at a portion of Scripture in which the apostle Paul describes his great ambition, and what that ambition led him to do. My prayer is that you will consider your own ambitions. What we hear today just might prompt us to change our ambitions.

But what is ambition? Well, we often speak of hope and ambition together. "I have great hopes and ambitions," we might say. Hope is the desire for something to happen...or trust in a promised or expected future outcome. However, it is possible to have a strong hope and just sit on your hands. Ambition is the desire to do or achieve something. Ambition requires your intense action and personal sacrifice for achievement.

Even in our culture we recognize that not all ambition is good. We speak of healthy ambition and unhealthy ambition. And of course there are those suffering from a lack of ambition. An unhealthy ambition is when we strive for something that is ultimately not good for us or others. Some people strive for perfection and are tremendously unhappy because they don't achieve it. That's an unhealthy ambition. Many rulers have had an unhealthy ambition for total power, and they weren't better off for it, and certainly the people around them were not either.

But we also recognize a lack of ambition isn't good either. If we are not striving for anything, we're very likely to accomplish nothing (or very little.)

So the nature of the achievement, and the focus of your heart is critical. A person is not ambitious unless he is willing to make sacrifices for the sake of his ambition. **What will you need to give up to reach your dream?** What is the Christians dream?

Today we will read about the great ambition of the apostle Paul. His ambition was one that moved to give up and sacrifice many things in order to achieve his ambition.

My prayer is that you will adopt Paul's ambition as your own and joyfully sacrifice as he died for a most worthy goal and end.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

So if you read what led up to this verse, you'll see Paul makes the point that the Christian has total freedom in Christ Jesus. Without Christ we are slaves to the law of God. We are forced to try to obey everything God has said. And we are doomed to fail because we lack the ability to perfectly obey. We are sinful by nature.

There are many areas where God has not spoken, and has only in a general way to give us the law of love to guide us.

Paul says the he is free and he is bound to no one. God has set him free through the gospel and he can serve God in whatever way he wants, as long as it is in line with God's law of love. There are no more "have-tos" for the Christian, just want tos. Transformed by the Spirit you will want to love God above all things, and love your neighbor as yourself. "You have to worship on Saturday. Have to worship on Sunday." No you don't. But you want to worship God regularly and you want to do that with your fellow redeemed if you have a changed heart. "You have to give 10% to the Lord." No you don't. But you want to honor God with what he has entrusted to you, and you'll want to give him your first and best. "You have to celebrate Christmas and Easter." No you don't. But you do want to rejoice in the birth of Christ and his glorious resurrection. So, no, you're

not free to disobey God and live rebelliously by hurting others. That's not freedom anyway, it's slavery to the devil. You are not under obligation to any law in order to earn a right relationship with God. You are free in Christ Jesus!

But now the question is, how will you use your freedom so that with great ambition you will lead others into the kingdom of God?

This is the point and it repeats again and again. Principle: **Love limits our liberty, and it has a great goal: to win as many to Christ as possible.**

Self-denial and self-control are needed in order to win people for Christ. Paul knows that relationship with Christ is culturally independent. Customs, holidays, norms, traditions... these things don't draw a person to Christ or drive them from him. Well, most don't. Occasionally, cultures do adopt practices that sinful. Of course, Paul isn't talking about those things. Paul will accommodate himself to any cultural norms, and put himself out, and give up his own freedoms, and do whatever he could to make people feel comfortable. In other words, Paul does whatever he can to remove any unnecessary stumbling blocks to the gospel. I say unnecessary because the gospel itself is a stumbling block. But do whatever you can to get all others out of the way.

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. First he talks about those who belong to the race of Jews... not to those who are Jews religiously. So whatever Jews did by tradition, whatever their customs, whatever their habits, whatever their worldview: Paul took it into account and became like them in every way. Paul would not eat pork among them, for that would be offensive and obscure the message. If it was important to them to celebrate a certain holiday or festival, he would do so. Because Christ had set him free from all of that, did Paul HAVE TO do these things? No. He gave up his freedoms because he knew that in so doing, his audience would be more likely to listen carefully.

To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. Here Paul is talking about those who lived by the Old Testament laws. So not Jews by race, but Jews by religion. This would include the proselytes – those who were not Jewish by race but who adopted the Jewish religion.

So these would be those who believed that to be right with God you had to fulfill the Old Testament rules and regulations. And Paul says that when he sought to preach to those under the law, he did not go in there breaking all the Old Testament rules and regulations left and right. He didn't violate their holy days. He didn't break their dietary laws. He carefully observed these things when he was among them.

Paul clearly says he himself was not under those laws. He knew that Christ had fulfilled the law perfectly for him, and so he was set free from having to keep them. But he chose to restrict his freedom and follow those laws when he was among those who followed those laws. This would give him the right to then speak the truth of the gospel.

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

Paul is not talking about the moral laws of God, for he says that he is under Christ's law – the law of love.) Those "not under law" would be Gentiles. Those who did not have or know or follow the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. He would not observe those ceremonial laws among those who did not know them or follow them. If he had, they would have marked him as different and odd, and not someone to be considered seriously.

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. One last category: the weak. Who are they? The context of Paul's other epistles tells us that Paul is referring to people who do not know the full

freedom that is theirs in Christ. Today we might describe such people as legalistic. They think that you must do and act a certain way in order to get God's favor. That's a weakness. It's not true. There is nothing we could do that would make God love us more. But Paul would consider their weakness – their law or requirement – and would observe it so as not to offend them so that he could clearly communicate the Gospel.

As an example that may help illustrate all of this: Timothy was a young pastor and one of Paul's traveling companions on his missionary journeys. Timothy was the son of a Jewish woman and his father was a gentile. Having a gentile father, Timothy was never circumcised, which all Jews and converts to Judaism are. Before taking him on a missionary journey, knowing they would be proclaiming the gospel to many Jews, Paul wanted Timothy to be circumcised first. Was this necessary for Timothy to be saved? Certainly not! It was done so as not to offend the Jews. If word got around that this man was not circumcised, they would not have listened to a word he said. Certainly, this procedure was more than a little painful for Timothy, but he willingly went through this minor surgery so the gospel might be heard and believed among the Jews.

There are many other examples of Paul considering his audience and removing whatever might be an offense that they might clearly hear the gospel, but we'll don't have time to consider them all now.

And again, why was he intentionally sacrificing his own freedoms?

I have become all things to all men 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 understood that his big goal and intent far superseded anything he sacrificed – the salvation of people's souls. So what Paul did was this:

- I could eat bacon; or I could not eat bacon and have a better shot at connecting these people to Christ. Decision is easy: I won't eat bacon.
- I could eat meat sacrificed to idols; I or not, and have a better shot at connecting these people to Christ. Decision is easy: I won't eat the meat.
- Or in our context, the decisions we weigh might be these: I could have a beer; or by not having a beer in front of this person at this time who is offended at all drinking, I might have a shot at connecting him to Christ. Decision is easy: don't drink.

Our ambition for sharing the gospel is greater than our own preference or convenience!

Have you always had godly ambitions? Do you intentionally sacrifice your freedoms for the sake of other people's souls? Or have you sometimes run roughshod over other people's sensitivities for the sake of your own personal benefit, and forfeited opportunities to share the message of Jesus Christ? Have you sometimes made yourself a very ugly medium for the beautiful Gospel message, and so hindered its communication?

We've all gotten this wrong at times. And before we can get it right, we first need relief from the guilt of our past failures. So let's take them to Jesus our perfect Savior. God so wanted to communicate to us his unconditional, unreasonable love and grace, that the Word itself / God himself took on human flesh. God said, "What context would communicate the message most clearly?" His decision? To come to us in human flesh. And so God became flesh and made his dwelling among us. As a Jewish man in Jewish culture, Jesus took away every possible stumbling block to the message – and only the message itself was as stumbling block to some.

Jesus communicated clearly exactly what the Father wanted us to understand. Our sins separate us from God. Our rebelliousness and disobedience are impenetrable barriers keeping us from God, preventing a relationship with him. And so they must be removed. We are helpless to

remove them. So God made a way. Jesus is that way, the truth and the life. His ambition was healthy, right and godly. His passion was the Father's will. His ambition was to fulfill the Father's plan of salvation. He personally sacrificed in order to make it happen. He didn't just sacrifice his own comforts, worldly wealth and pleasures, acceptance from his religious peers. He sacrificed much more to fulfill his ambition: he sacrificed his very life. For our sins, a life must be given. Jesus gave his life for your life. He died on the cross, bearing the full penalty for every last one of your sins!

Trusting in Jesus, you are forgiven. Your ambitions are reset, recalibrated, refocused. Life is all about living for the one who gives us eternal life. And the greatest way to honor him is to lead others to him that they may have what you already have – forgiveness, life and salvation. And the only way to lead others to Jesus is by preaching the Gospel. And the best way to preach the Gospel is to remove all offenses from the medium so that the Gospel is clearly and directly heard. And we remove such offenses when we carefully consider the person to whom we want to communicate. We become like them in every way we can that does not involve sin. **We become all things to all people so that by all possible means, we might save some.** Another name for this is “contextualization.” We present the gospel fully considering the context in which our hearer will receive it.

One preacher (Tim Keller) said it like this: *“Contextualization is not — as is often argued — ‘giving people what they want to hear.’ Rather, it is giving people the Bible’s answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them.”*

You see, people often have a hard time **separating the medium from the message**. Imagine an executive is pitching a buyout offer to the other company's board of directors. Will his message be received the same if he is well-groomed and wears a tailored, profession business suit or if his hair is messed up, he has ketchup on his chin and he wears a ratty t-shirt and ripped jeans? The message may be identical, but sometimes the medium can hinder the message.

So the truth is: **Our lifestyle and customs can sometimes hinder the communication of the message. Your message may not be heard because of the loud interference of your lifestyle.**

Our godly ambition is to share Christ with others. In love for Christ, and in love for others we will sacrifice our own preferences, comfort, convenience, habits, traditions, or anything else that might hinder the communication of the gospel, and adapt ourselves to our audience that nothing may stand in the way of the communication of the most important message in the world: Christ Jesus came to save sinners.

Are we saying that to winning people to Christ depends on our contextualization of the message, and how well we can adapt to a person's culture and worldview? No. But those things are what earn you the right to speak the truth. If you go in like a bull in a China shop and offend people, they will not hear the message. They will mentally dismiss you before you have a chance to preach the truth. Seek to remove all potential offenses so that all that is left is God's grace and truth to offend. People very well may not want to hear God's answers to their biggest problems. God's law is offensive. And the gospel is too... that you needed and God gave a complete Savior from sin, and you do nothing to earn God's good grace and favor. Offensive! Let that offense remain, or we lose God's message. But strive to eliminate all other things that may offend.

Friends I pray you go today filled with great ambition. A health ambition. A godly ambition. Be filled with an unstoppable, self-sacrificing zeal to be all things to all people that might earn the right to share the gospel... so that by all possible means, some might be saved!

All things to all people – that was Paul's ambition that some might be saved. May it be your ambition too! Amen.