

“The Prism”

I Corinthians 9:16-23

Intro

Have you ever read an article all the way through it only to realize that you are more confused now about the stated issue than before you read the article in the first place?

If you have not felt the joy of this experience, then I invite you to try and take on this section in I Corinthians without the use of a Biblical commentary or two. (There were actually moments this past week when I felt like I should just preach from another passage rather than completely missing the point of this one.)

As I read this piece of scripture, I could envision Paul writing as quickly as he possibly could so that he could get down on to parchment the thoughts that were coming to his mind at an even faster pace. You see, the people he was writing to, the Christians in the city of Corinth, which was located on a narrow strip of land that connected the mainland of Greece, its peninsula (also known as, just down the road from Athens), had begun developing quite a few of their own thoughts about how they felt the church should operate.

Basically, they felt that they knew enough about God and how the church should run, that they didn't need Paul and his guidance anymore.

Because of this fact, Paul is writing like a parent to a child trying to get them to understand what was actually true. The difficulty is that there are those times as a parental voice that you begin to get so frustrated that the pace of your voice quickens as the volume of your voice raises and you end up shouting. To me, this is where I picture Paul at emotionally in regard to the argument he's making. He started out trying to console them but now he is starting to realize just how frustrated he truly is with this church that he was instrumental in founding and he's going to let them know it. He's going to let them know that God has appointed him. This appointment is to go out into the world and bring the message of Christ to everyone who will listen, whether they be Jew or Gentile. It is in this last fact, that Paul is able to reach people of all religious backgrounds, that we are able to ask the question of ourselves, is the message that we bring to the world, that same message of the risen Christ that Paul delivered, is this message able to be understood by the different types of people who are around us? The scripture reads this way.

I Corinthians 9:16-23

¹⁶ If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

¹⁹ For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. ²⁰ 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 I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I

am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law.²² To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

"The Prism"

I've mentioned it at different points over the years, but for those who may have missed those illustrations (or those of you who haven't memorized the entirety of my family's stories...yes, I know you do exist!) when my parents moved my brothers and I from the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania up to the Mid-Hudson Valley in the state of New York, there was an invitation extended from my parents to my paternal grandparents welcoming them to live with us as they felt that was something that they wanted to do. I was about 13 at the time.

Wonder of wonders, after a little bit of thinking, my grandparents decided this was a good idea and packed up everything that they had collected over the years, left the town where they had lived the entirety of their married lives and moved 4 ½ hours and a culture shock away.

Many of you may be saying to yourselves, "What a wonderful thing, having three generations under the same roof, eating at the same table."

For the most part I would agree with you.

However, this is not going to be one of those stories. This is going to be the other side of living with three generations of your family who are equally stubborn and determined to get their point across.

I loved my grandfather very much, but there were those times when I had to wonder what in the world he was thinking. He had those moments when he became so transfixed on a particular issue that it was as if the world had ceased revolving in its traditional orbit and had instead begun to revolve around that one particular, miniscule item which now, in his eyes, had the gravitational strength of the sun.

In this particular example, the center of my Grandfather's universe was . . .the lawn. And in specific, the spot of lawn that he was able to see when he sat in his chair on the deck. Did the grass need to be cut? Yes.

However, I was busy. I needed to get to wherever I was going (you know, right away!!) and grandpa needed to drive me. I knew how things were and grandpa needed to back off and let me do what I wanted to do. He knew what I thought because, well, I told him what I thought.

It was at this point that the figurative hammer fell and grandpa let me know in his stodgy way how things were actually going to be: the lawn was going to be mowed or else I was not going anywhere. He knew my schedule. He knew that I had a few minutes. He knew that I needed to get off my high horse. He knew that he wasn't going to get off of his horse that was just as high. He knew he had the keys to the car. He let me know how things were going to be.

Paul has taken up position as the grandfather in his letter to the Corinthians and he is not going to back down. He is letting them know that he still has the proverbial keys to the car and that they need to listen to what he has to say. The Christians at Corinth made some sort of a statement to Paul, one that has been lost in the constant motion of time.

However, through Paul's retort, we are able to surmise that, among other things, they did not believe that Paul was a voice that spoke of and for God. They doubted, if not rejected, his apostleship. They believed that his techniques of spreading the gospel to the world, both Jew and Gentile, showed just how false he was. The Corinthians looked at Paul and saw a man who stood for nothing, let alone those things of God. The Corinthians, or at least a very vocal group of the Christians at Corinth, were leading a kind of revolt. They felt that they were now the people who could speak on behalf of God. They were almost saying, "Paul? Who needs Paul? Paul is someone who speaks for only himself and says whatever needs to be said so that he is in charge."

Needless to say, after this sort of message getting to him through the back channels of Christendom about what some of the Corinthians thought of him ...he was more than a little upset. In previous verses he states how he is an apostle, how he has seen the risen Christ, how he is serving as God has called him to do.

He then launches into the section that we heard. The way that he talks about the proclamation of the Gospel, we are able to understand that he does not preach of his own will or personal reward but instead because God has placed an obligation on his heart. "An obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" If Paul did not proclaim the Word of God, it would be like a fish who refused to swim. It would be against the very nature of life.

This Call of Paul's to proclaim has made him like a slave to the world. He is to be a servant to the entirety of the world by proclaiming the living message of Christ. He is allowing the very core of his being, an amazingly deep faith in the saving message, to become a light that is able to guide the lives of all those who have felt lost and separated from God. The very core of his being is on display so that others might come to know.

However, the different ways that this message, the core of Paul's life, could be presented, were numerous. This is one of the things that the Corinthians are critiquing. They are saying, "Paul, you are not being consistent. When you are with the Jews, you are like the Jews. When you are with the Greeks, you are like one of the Greeks. Which is it? God can't possibly work like this."

Paul's response? "Look past the window dressing of Jew or Greek and look at the core of the message being sent. At its core, the message is the same."

As long as we can stay consistent to the core, a faith in that living message of Christ, then we can become like a kaleidoscope for the world, one image that is able to be seen, described and experienced in many ways. If you hold on to the core with all your might, then you can go into the poorest ghetto, the richest home, the most familiar of territories, the strangest of lands and be able live the faith that you have been called to proclaim. The message that we are to proclaim is not something that has only one rendition. The message we proclaim, the faith we live, is able to transcend all the human barriers that have been constructed ... if we allow it.

Look, we like to categorize ourselves. Clearly, the Corinthians like to categorize themselves. Sometimes it takes someone like Paul to stand and say that these categories that we cling to are not the be-all-and-end-all to how we deal with the world. The categories of I'm so many years old, I do this for a living, I have X number of kids, I'm good at that particular thing, I come from a certain corner of the world, I like this kind of music, I go to this particular church and all the others are merely that, categories. They should not be what stands at our core. If we allow these things, these bits and pieces of window dressing, to become our core then we will have a very difficult time allowing the life giving faith that we do possess to reach out to others.

So what's at your core? Because whatever is at your core will be able to be reflected and refracted through all that you do, all that you say, all that you are. What's at your core?

We need to have this faith in the risen Christ at our core. If our core is solid, then the world can be able to see us in a multitude of ways, all reflecting the centrality of our faith in God's risen Son. Allow your faith in Christ to become the core of your life and you will be amazed at all of the ways that you will be able to step out and serve the world. When we have Christ as our core, then the prism of our lives will reflect that life giving message.

After Sermon Prayer

God, we can hear through Paul's retort to the Corinthians, much like a grandfather's stubborn stand to his grandson, that you do not want us to become stuck in the ways that have always been. You want us to grow, develop and adapt so that the entirety of the world might be able to experience what should be at the core of each of our beings: our faith in You and Your Son's life giving message. When we hold fast to that core, then there is nothing that can shake us, not even the world. We have seen through Paul that when You are involved, all things are possible, even growing beyond the biases and window-dressings that, at times, we like to hold on to as if our world depended on it. God, help us, through Your Spirit, to put our faith in You at the core of our lives. When You do this through us, we will become a prism that allows one object, one core, to be experienced in so many ways. Lord, let it be so. Amen.