

“What Motivates You?” 1 Corinthians 9:15-18

Introduction

- On our vacation last week Miriam and I visited the historic Old First Church of Bennington, Vermont. Organized in 1762, it literally was the first church in Vermont. The founders were influenced by the First Great Awakening, that fresh wind of the Spirit that brought new life to dead and dying churches all over New England. According to their history, the church was founded on the idea that only those who were genuinely born again should be admitted to membership.
- The building is beautiful. The architecture is incredible. We snapped a couple of pictures of me standing in the elevated pulpit that towers fifteen feet above pew boxes below.
- As I talked to our tour guide, an elderly retired Lutheran pastor who also attends the church, he confessed something to me. He looked up at me with great heartache, you could just see it in his eyes, and he said “they just don’t preach the gospel here.” The place was dead. No spiritual life. He knew it. I knew it. Yeah there was a building. But there was no church. Just guided tours. And it was beyond sad. It was disturbing.
- How does it happen? You see it in denominations. You see it in churches. You see it in the lives of those you love. I see it here. And I see it in my own life. This tendency to grow cold. To lose focus. To drift. To wander. It’s not a question of if we grow cold. The questions are “how far have we drifted” and “do we even recognize it.” Please hear me. We as a church, at any given moment, if we lose our grasp on and love for the gospel, we’re not that far removed from guided tours.
- What are you living for? Really? What motivates you? Why do you get out of bed every day? What are you passionate about? When you talk to people what are the things that light your eyes? Be honest. Why are you here? I don’t want us to just play church. I want us to be the church. If you call yourself a Christian let me remind you of your purpose.

Proposition

- **You and I exist to glorify God by bearing passionate witness to the world what God has done for us through the cross of Jesus Christ**
- There is nothing else for the Christian. There is no other reason for which to gather on Sunday morning. If the activities and business of the church on Sunday and every other day of the week don’t have this purpose of passionate witness at the front and center of all it does you have churchy things but you don’t have the true Church. It all revolves around the good news of the cross.
- I have to be honest with you. I think we are at a really critical time in the life of this church. There are some really good things happening right now. I’m proud of you guys. God’s been pruning and you’re growing. And behind the scenes, there are some things coming along that I’m very excited about. But as I observe and talk and listen and pray I also sense mounting opposition from our enemy. I sense us being pulled and tugged and nudged away from this purpose to bear passionate witness to the world. I see busyness. I see illness. I see the marriage difficulties. I see idleness and laziness. I see heartache. I see poor choices. I

see isolation and loneliness. I see financial difficulties. I see distractions. And if we aren't careful and vigilant and repentant and dependent and if we don't all work to get to know each other and get on the same page and working toward the same goal I see our witness being compromised. We only have one purpose; **to bear passionate witness to the world what God has done for us through Jesus.**

Transition

I love the passage we are going to look at this morning for the simple reason that in it we get to see the heart of a man who didn't lose his passion for the gospel. Think of all that Paul went through—the floggings, the death threats, the stoning, the shipwrecks, the imprisonments—and yet his passion and commitment and desire to bear witness to the gospel didn't wane at all. I can summarize the theme of 1 Corinthians 9 in four words; passion for the gospel. The thing that comes through most clearly in these verses is Paul's passion. His passion to see the good news about Jesus expand and grow is what drives Paul, it's what motivates him. And may this passion for the gospel rub off on us. As I've looked at these verses this week I think...

Organizational Sentence

- **There are two parts to living passionately for the gospel**

Transition

The **first**? From verses 15-16. **A refusal to do anything that might hinder the spread of the gospel.** And the **second**? From verses 17-18? **There is great reward in serving so that the gospel might be advanced.** These things aren't the summation of what it means to live passionately for the gospel. These are just the two things these four verses suggest. Look at verses 15 and 16. *But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me. I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast. 16 Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*

Main Points

- Sometimes the biggest part of living a life that really matters kingdom wise is not shooting yourself in the foot. It's not necessarily doing, doing, doing for God—being this super Christian—whatever that means in your mind. The biggest part of living a life that really matters kingdom wise is much less noticeable. It's not compromising. It's guarding your integrity. Faithfulness in the little things. It's dotting the i's and crossing the t's. Paul simply refuses to do anything that might compromise or hinder the spread of the gospel. I think Paul made all his decisions in life based on that one, single, solitary criterion. Will my actions, will my words, will my choices, will my thoughts in any way slow the advance of the good news of the gospel.
- Remember, the Corinthians had issues with Paul's authority. He had no street cred with them. Why? Silly as it sounds, he wasn't charging them for his ministry. They actually didn't take Paul seriously because he wasn't asking them for money. He had the right to earn a living from his ministry to them. Jesus said so in Luke 10:7. And Paul mentions that right earlier in 1 Corinthians 9:9.
- But Paul refuses that right. *But I have not used any of these rights* he says in **verse 15**. And then he says *I would rather die* than have that boast of not receiving support taken away.

Why? Again, the issue is not money. What's at stake with the Corinthians is the credibility of the gospel itself. By not receiving support from the Corinthians Paul was distancing himself from those teachers in the church who were charging the church to watch their super-spiritual dog and pony show. In 2 Corinthians 11:5 Paul facetiously calls them the *super-apostles*. Their antics were actually discrediting the gospel.

- And Paul would rather die than discredit the gospel that saved him. He cares so much about this gospel that he says *I'd rather die* than compromise that message. I'd rather die than do something to detract people's attention from the power of the cross. *I'm compelled to preach* he says. *Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel*. Paul's words in verses 15 and 16 simply support what he's already said to them in [verse 12](#). *On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ*. Advancing the gospel in the world is Paul's overarching motivation for all he does.¹
- And that, I believe, is the principle Paul lays down for us to follow. **Being a Christian means bearing passionate witness to the world what God has done for us through Jesus**. A major part of that, the major part of it, is living in such a way that the gospel remains front and center of everything.
- You see, all too frequently by our actions and our priorities and by what we give our time and money to what we're really saying to our kids and to our friends and to our coworkers is that the gospel really isn't all that important. Instead of drawing people's attention to the cross and how it has changed our lives we detract people's attention from the power of the cross. We're the reverse of what Paul says. We would rather die than have the constraints and demands of the gospel impede us in any way. And it's not just what we give our time to, or our actions or priorities, it's how we give our time; it's how we go about making our priorities. Are we living passionately for the gospel or for something else?
- Let's face it. We're compromisers. We belt out our loving worship on Sunday morning and then live the other 165 hours of the week completely oblivious to what it means to live gospel centered lives. Our hearts are hard. Our love is cold.
- At the Free Church national conference this past June, during one of the sessions, the speaker gave each person in attendance a stone. I was with Dale Pierce at the time. We were asked to keep our stones for thirty days to remind us to pray that God would soften our hard hearts. During the service I happened to notice Dale's stone. It's just not fair. Unlike mine, which was black with deep fissures in it, Dale's stone was translucent white and smooth as glass. Afterwards, I joked around with Dale about the differences between our two stones. Innocent little Dale with this pure white stone and Eric with this blackened pock-marked rock.
- You know what? My heart is black and hard. And if I don't continually guard my heart. If I'm not careful the gospel can and will be come, albeit slowly and gradually, ancillary, unimportant and non-influential in my life. It'll get pushed aside. And before you know it, the way I live, because of little compromises, can actually hinder the advance of the gospel, even the efforts and work of other kingdom workers. Don't lose sight of what this life as a Christian is all about. We are called to be witnesses in word, in deed to the power of the cross that really does change people's lives.

Transition

¹ Garland, p. 421.

I want each and every one of us to live as passionate witnesses to God's great work through Jesus. There is no greater joy and reward. Which brings us to the **second part** of passionately living for the gospel? Look at **verses 17-18**? **There is great reward in serving so that the gospel might be advanced.** Listen. *If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.*

- I know of no other spiritual high that is as rewarding and fulfilling and satisfying or as energizing as using your god-given gifts so that the message of the gospel spreads. It's one thing to serve. We are called to be servants. But that's just part of it. Ultimately we serve for the purpose of witness. As members of the body of Christ we are called to serve in such a way that our service brings attention to the head—to Christ himself.
- I think that's what Paul's getting at in verses 17 and 18. We each have our own part to play. Paul's part was to preach. *Woe to me if I do not preach.* He's not some hired gun who preaches for pay, for financial reward. He doesn't do what he does voluntarily. His service is involuntary. He's a slave. A steward discharging his trust. Therefore, he's compelled to preach. He's under compulsion to use his gifts to advance the gospel. And yet there's still a reward. It may not be financial, but there is a reward. *What then is my reward?* As verse 18 puts it. *What's Paul's reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.* What does he mean? I think he means that his reward is in serving in such a way that, unhindered, unshackled by any outward constraint on his life or ministry and through his gift of preaching the gospel freely grows and spreads among his hearers in the same way that it was freely given to him. That's his compensation.
- Again, the principle for us is quite clear. There is tremendous reward in serving others by means of our spiritual gifts. But the reward is not just in using the gift. It's using the gift in such a way that attention is drawn to Christ and the message about Christ. I am convinced that many of us have forgotten that that's what it means to serve. That's the reward in serving. If there's no joy, no reward in connection to your service to Christ then there's probably little or no connection to the gospel. Because if your service is connected to the gospel, which changes lives, and through your service—whatever small and inconsequential your part might be—lives change because of that gospel—there is no great reward. And those of you who are serving right now and are seeing the gospel bear fruit through your service know exactly what I'm talking about and how rich a reward that is.
- Unfortunately, too much Christian work and service is busywork with no clear and compelling connection to the gospel. And that's my fault as a leader for not helping you see how your gifts fit into the larger picture of bringing people to Christ. Being a Christian and serving is not about keeping the machinery of church structures functional and operational. It's about being missional; living with a passionate purpose to stand as a witness to the glory of the cross of Christ. As Christians we serve, we use our spirit-enabled gifts for one purpose only; to draw attention to Christ—to the one who was lifted up on the cross so that others might believe in him and have eternal life. When you play your unique part in seeing that happen, there is joy and reward unspeakable.

Conclusion

- Newton's first law of motion says that an object at rest tends to remain at rest, and an object in motion tends to continue in motion in a straight line unless acted upon by an outside force.²
- We stopped by the county fair yesterday morning. Seeing some of the booths brought back some memories and some well learned lessons with regard to physical laws. When I was a kid there was a game at our local fair that was absolutely impossible to win—I don't think I saw this game yesterday. The object was to roll a bowling ball along a track over a series of hills so that it would roll over the first hill but not roll over the second. If the bowling ball came to rest in the valley between the two peaks you won one of those gargantuan stuffed animals. The reason that game was so hard to win was because the first hill was always higher than the second. And that bowling ball as it moved over the first hill always generated enough momentum to carry it over the second hill.
- Everything in this world has inertia. Your spiritual life has an inertia set in motion by God's gospel the moment he saves you by the cross of Christ. That starting inertia continues to passionately move us in a gospel directed course until we allow outside forces to diminish that momentum. How's your momentum? Are you still steamrolling, richly rewarded by your service for his glory or have you come to a complete standstill—just dead weight?
- As the worship team comes back up to close us I want to draw your attention to Psalm 125:5-6. Listen. *Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. 6 He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.* I think deep down we all want to reap a harvest with our lives and by our service. The only way to get there is through tears of repentance. I invite you to respond to God right now.

²"Inertia," Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.