

For seven weeks (today we're on week 5) we're spending some time in the book of 1 Corinthians in the New Testament, which was at first a letter known famously as being written by the apostle Paul to a new church in the city of Corinth in Greece around 55 AD

The chapter we're looking at today and that Sharon read partly for us - chapter 9 - as well as chapter 8 and 10, before and after it, can be summed up together in this one argument from Paul, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ."

There are a couple of principles I want to direct us to look out for from this chapter and - in order to inspire us to get closer to God - either to begin to today or continue to know God personally and intimately.

The first principle I want to suggest is "getting beyond ourselves involves giving up some of our rights." [say twice]. As we dive into chapter 9 we'll find God calling us to see beyond some of our rights and privileges so that God can use us to spread the message of forgiveness and love to as many people as possible.

We might wonder, *How far should I go - how many or which rights or principles should I give up - to accommodate the conscience of another person in order to connect with them to win them over to Christ?* Paul answered this question by using his own life as an example. In this chapter he begins with what reads like a resume to convince the believers in Corinth of his authority and to see that surrendering his rights didn't decrease his authority [read vs 1 & 2 again].

Paul's life and writings affirm that it's normal to expect certain privileges associated with our position in life. Here in this reading, he declared himself an apostle. The word apostle literally means "one who's sent" and in those days referred to the people who were appointed by Jesus for a special function - based on - 1) being an eye witness of His resurrection. Paul was claiming here that he had seen the resurrected Christ himself - that he was an eyewitness, which was a requirement of apostleship and 2) apostles were commissioned and empowered by Jesus to proclaim the gospel. We remember that in Acts Paul had a personal encounter with the resurrected Christ and through Ananias, Jesus

himself tells Paul to carry His name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

In this chapter Paul explained the rights that usually accompanied apostleship. As an apostle, he had a right to be paid - that one should reap what one sows. However, he laid that right aside. Read vs 18 again. What did Paul claim was his pay? Basically his pay was making the good news of Jesus Christ - free of charge to all.

Read verse 19 again. Why did Paul say he had become a slave? Basically to win more people to Christ. Even though he was free, Paul gave up some of his rights and became a servant in order to help people come to know Christ. In a small way, when we sacrifice "me time" or add time to an already packed schedule in order to do something for someone else, especially if we do it to show God's love to them, we're making small sacrifices that honor God and that God honors. Other times God may be convicting us to give up big things in order to share the good news of Jesus Christ. It's a good practice to continually ask God to reveal areas where we may be valuing personal comfort over the development of OUR CHARACTER in order to show others the love of God we already know for ourselves.

I was thinking about applying this principle to my own life - the idea of giving up certain rights or in order to show others the love of God - as I ate my first Costco pumpkin muffin of the season (I love pumpkin products in the fall!) - as I was eating this muffin, one of the things that came to mind was my deep longing for an actual family Thanksgiving at our house this year. You see - traditionally - in the past - my family has celebrated Thanksgiving by everyone coming to our house - About 12 people usually. In fact, for many years both of my parents and one of my older brothers would come the day before Thanksgiving and spend Wednesday night and Thursday night after Thanksgiving with us also. It was really precious family time once a year and makes me sad to remember what last year was like.

I thought about *this* year and the hope that we actually might be able to gather in person again and my deliberation, as for many families around the holidays - had to do with alcohol. My parents,

following the Methodist tradition - are teetotalers - I grew up in a dry home, no alcohol at all. Did you know that one of the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church is abstinence from alcohol and drugs? Our Book of Discipline - which kind of governs our way of life as Methodist Christians - lines out 39 pages of Social Principles - which you might want to look up on the internet, they're pretty interesting - in section "L. Alcohol and other Drugs" it reads: "We affirm our long-standing support of abstinence from alcohol as a faithful witness to God's liberating and redeeming love for persons. We support the abstinence from the use of any illegal drugs."

In fact, Thomas B. Welch - of Welch's grape juice - was originally a dentist and a communion steward at a Methodist church in New Jersey, in 1869. He perfected the pasteurizing process for grapes in his kitchen in order to provide unfermented - non alcoholic grape juice - instead of wine for communion in his Methodist church. He attended the Methodist church during the temperance movement and offering grape juice for communion became an act of justice at that time.

That's why the Methodist church offers grape juice instead of wine for communion, because of our Social Principles and because we want to welcome children to the table of grace.

But we all have the right legally if we are over the age of 21, to enjoy forms of alcohol safely. And I, like some of you, do have wine in my home sometimes and over the holidays enjoy traditional eggnog. However - not only do I have underage youth in my own home, but also a few in my have struggled with alcohol use in the past. For quite a few years now, though I have the right, and I enjoy these drinks, I've chosen to get beyond myself and not make alcohol available during our holiday celebrations. This is just one, small example of what comes to mind for me about getting beyond myself by giving up some of my rights in order to show love - first given to me by God - to others.

What comes to mind for you in terms of a right God might be asking you to consider giving up in order to show another His love?

The second principle I want to briefly offer is: Getting beyond ourselves involves finding common ground.

Read a little further and look at verses 20-23 of chapter nine. When I read this, what I understand Paul is trying to say is that when he met different groups of people in order to tell them about Jesus and the life possible in Him, Paul tried to become one of them - I think he did that in order to be trusted by them and to understand who they were. So instead of going into a new group of people, or even into a new friendship, and telling people how wrong they were or how they needed to change, Paul tried instead, to not judge and get to know them. He tried to become one of them. He tried to find common ground.

The question for us today is - how do we get beyond ourselves to find common ground and share our hope in Jesus. And I think the key here is about not judging and giving others respect as we listen, speak and act.

I've noticed for myself over the years that sometimes when I meet a new person or group of people, I tend to judge them in my mind by what I see and what they say. I put my prejudices on them and think I know them and who they are right away. For instance, have you ever met someone and by who they are on the outside you make immediate assumptions about who they are on the inside? But when you got to know them better, they turned out to be really different than you assumed? That's definitely happened to me. But experience has taught me to work hard to keep from judging, because more often than not I'm wrong. Working really hard not to judge a person gives me room to get closer and know them better and show them love.