



The 2000 movie, *The Patriot*, starred Mel Gibson as Benjamin Martin, a reluctant Revolutionary War hero. Martin has an 18-year-old son named Gabriel who is eager to join the conflict. Tragically, Gabriel becomes a casualty of the war and, suffering deep loss, his father Benjamin Martin appears ready to quit the cause.

While Martin is grieving at the side of his dead son, Colonel Harry Burwell, a Continental officer, attempts to persuade Martin not to quit. He recognizes Martin has great influence with the soldiers and his departure would demoralize the troops. The colonel says, "Stay the course, Martin. Stay the course."

Grief-stricken, Martin responds, "I've run the course." Resigned to the outcome, the colonel informs the troops and they ride on, leaving Martin behind.

It seems to me Benjamin had been up to that point a man with a dream. This could be the dream of any follower of Christ. As believers we long to see the Bay Area transformed by the gospel. I've pastored in the Bay Area for almost 30 years and I'd love to see this as a place known for strong and vibrant churches that are teaching the Scriptures and reaching their communities for Christ. But sometimes I look around and I think we're further away from that than when I started. There are some encouraging signs here and there, but this place is as godless as it's ever been. Sometimes, especially on Mondays, I want to give up. If God wants to transform the Peninsula, I'll leave it up to him. My efforts don't seem to matter that much.

When that pessimism of spirit comes on me, I take encouragement from the apostle Paul. If you're a Christian you probably think of Paul as hardly a man who would face discouragement. It's hard to think of him ever ready to quit the cause. We think of Paul as superhuman, with a determination and commitment few have. But if you read Paul's letters closely you'll see he was just a man. He was short in stature, with bad eyesight, and he wore on his body the marks of brutal beatings. Besides all the physical hardship, he talks of worries and fears and confusion. He says there are times he "despaired even of life." He didn't want to go on. He was done, ready to quit. And his life ended in a dungeon in Rome. He was killed in Nero's persecution.

But somehow Paul and his band of followers made an impact on the first century. No one could argue they changed the course of history. So now we name our dogs after Nero and our sons after

Paul! What made the difference? What enabled Paul to make that kind of impact on a time and place every bit as discouraging as our own? Some would say, "Paul was filled with God's Spirit." But the Holy Spirit is also given to us. The Spirit hasn't changed. He fills us and empowers us just like Paul. Someone else might say, "Well, Paul had a special calling. God grabbed hold of him on the road to Damascus and sent him out to preach." But Jesus calls **all** of us. Maybe not in quite the same way but he said to all of us, "Go into all the world and make disciples of every nation."

I think there was something else that set Paul apart from us. It was his perspective. Paul brought a perspective to the ministry that shows what it takes to make a difference in the world. You see flashes of that perspective all over his letters, but you see it shine most brightly in 1 Corinthians 9, starting in v. 24.

### **Paul's perspective reveals the secret to making an impact.**

**Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified (verses 24–29).**

The image behind what Paul writes is the Greek games. We live in a culture that's obsessed with sports; the Greeks weren't much different. We measure time backward and forward by the birth of Jesus, but the Greeks measured time from the start of the Olympic Games. The Olympics were held in Athens every four years, but every two years the Isthmian games were held in Corinth. The streets of the city and the gymnasia bulged with athletes training for this event. They were required to swear by Zeus to follow ten months of strict training beforehand. Actually, the word gymnasium comes from the Greek word *gymnast*, which means *naked*, because athletes competed in the nude. Women normally weren't allowed to attend, but men would flock to the Games. The most noble citizens would be chosen as judges. They'd be dressed in purple and sit on thrones and start the contest and judge the winners. One of their jobs was to make sure no one broke the rules. There were usually five events. The foot-race would come first and then later would be the boxing

competition. Boxers wore leather gloves that covered most of their forearms except their fingers. It was a violent sport.

It's interesting that Jews who lived in Greece would have nothing to do with the Games. They couldn't handle the nudity and they suspected the athletes of homosexuality. But Paul, a former Jewish Rabbi, was determined to reach the Greeks for Christ. He seemed to have an appreciation of the athletes and all it took for them to compete. Paul was impressed with their dedication and discipline. They'd given up everything to have the winners' wreath placed on their head.

Paul says, "That's the perspective I bring to the ministry. I see myself like an athlete training for the games, competing for the prize." Have you ever seen an Olympic marathon runner as he enters the stadium, straining to finish that final lap? Have you ever seen a boxer as he comes out of his corner for the final round, glistening with sweat and almost unable to lift his arms above his waist? Paul says, "That's me. That's the perspective I bring. I'm as passionate and committed and self-disciplined as that."

The question is, what was Paul striving for? You can be passionate about the wrong things. He talks in v. 26 of those who run without aim and box as though beating the air. What was Paul aiming at?

### **Paul was motivated by a desire to preach the gospel.**

**For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it (verses 19–23).**

The answer comes earlier in the chapter. Throughout these verses Paul uses one verb over and over again. It's the verb "to win." In v. 19 he says he wants to "win more" people. In v. 20 he wants to win Jews who are under the law. In v. 21 he wants to win gentiles who are not under Jewish law. In v. 22 he wants to win the weak. What does it mean to win someone? The answer comes at the end of v. 22. He changes the verb. It's not "to win" but rather "to save." To win people is to save people. He wants to win people to faith in Christ because by winning people to Christ he saves them. Paul believed that. He believed apart from Christ people perish. There is an old song written by Fanny Crosby:

*Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,  
Snatch them in pity from sin and the grave;  
Weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen,  
Tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save.  
Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,  
Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.*

We don't sing that song much any more but I think Paul would have liked it. It's like a scientist at a research hospital. He discovers a cure for cancer. What would happen if he refused to share that cure with others? To have a cure for cancer and not share it with others would be a sin against science and humanity. His heart would be as cold and hard as concrete. To know the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves people from an eternity separated from God and not to share it with others is a sin against both God and humanity. To know your sins are forgiven and because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus; to know you have the hope of eternal life and not share it with others is cold and heartless.

A couple of weeks ago I parked up the street from my local coffee place and got out of my car. I noticed a woman in front of a nail salon burning money. I got a bit closer and saw it was fake money. She was burning it and throwing it on what looked like a makeshift altar. I asked her what she was doing and she said she was offering this money up for her dead mother so her mother would enjoy herself in heaven. Honestly, I was kind of stunned. I said, "Look, if your mom is in heaven don't you think she's okay? Isn't she enjoying herself enough? Do you really need to burn fake money?" She just laughed. I just walked away.

I'm glad I said something, but I should have said more. To know how that woman could be freed from enslaving superstition and not share it with her is a sin against God and sin against humanity.

### **Paul sacrificed his rights to win people for Christ.**

Paul speaks in v. 24 about a prize. In essence, he says just because you're running doesn't mean you're going to get the prize. You have to run in such a way that you can win. How do you do that? You do that by what he calls in v. 25 "*exercising self-control in all things.*" In v. 27 he says "*I discipline (bruise, buffet) my body to make it my slave.*" What's he talking about? He's talking about giving up his rights, his comfort level, enduring pain. Years ago, the Wheaties box featured a guy named Bob Richards, an Olympic pole vault champion. Years after competing, he asked Olympic athletes, "How do you handle the pain?" He never had anyone say, "What pain?" They just told him how they handled it. That's the perspective of Paul and anyone who wants to make a difference. Throughout chapters 8 and 9 he's made it clear he'll give up any right or level of comfort to win someone to Christ.

In chapter 8 he said he was willing to give up the freedom he had to eat meat. Most of the meat in Corinth had at one time or

another been sacrificed to an idol. Many of the young believers in Corinth had come from a lifestyle of idolatry. It was hard for them to separate the meat from the idolatry. Some of the believers in Corinth were saying, "Look, we know there is only one God. Idols aren't real. Why not eat the meat? We're not controlled by superstition." Paul also knew that and had the freedom in his conscience to eat the meat, but Paul also knew there were people whose faith could be damaged if he did so. So Paul said if that's the case I'll become a vegetarian. I don't think Paul had a problem with drinking wine, but there might be others who came out of a lifestyle of drunkenness who did. Paul said, if that's the case, I won't drink around them.

In chapter 9 Paul says there was another right he gave up. As an apostle, he had the right to financial support. He defended that right in great detail and with great passion. He went back to the teaching of Jesus and said "*the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel*" (v. 14). But he also knew there would be some in Corinth who might question his motives. So he said, "*Nevertheless we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.*" Just as an athlete gives up his right to eat certain food and to a certain amount of free time, Paul gave up his right to financial support for the sake of winning people to Christ.

But that's not all he gave up. He also gave up his cultural preferences. One of the problems with people as passionate as Paul is they often build walls instead of bridges. They turn people off. So Paul says he gave up more than just his rights; he gave up his cultural preferences that create walls instead of bridges. That's what he's getting at in v. 19 when he says though he's free from all men he becomes a slave to all. He gives three examples.

First, to the Jews and to those under Jewish law he became like a Jew. He didn't have to do that. He'd grown up as a Jew. He knew the drill. He knew the burden of the Jewish law. He'd been freed from it and it was like removing a heavy pack from his back. But he was willing to put that pack back on to win his fellow Jews. He'd go to the synagogue, take part in the liturgy, observe their feasts, eat only kosher food, obey the Sabbath. It's not what he wanted to do, but he was willing.

Second, to gentiles, to those not under Jewish law, he became like one of them. I doubt Paul liked eating pork. It was probably repugnant to him. But if he was having dinner at a gentiles' house and they served him pork chops, he'd eat them. Not only that, he spoke their language. When he preached to Greeks in Athens he quoted from their own philosophers. He didn't use a bunch of jargon from the Old Testament they wouldn't understand; he spoke in ways they could relate to.

Third, he says to the weak he became weak. In chapter 8 he spoke of those "weaker brothers" with sensitive consciences. He's happy to restrict his own freedom for their sake.

Finally, he says he became all things to all men. This doesn't mean Paul was some kind of spin doctor who twisted his message this way and that to suit different audiences. His message remained constant; his morals remained constant, but everything else was on the table.

Why is it when we think about evangelism, we think of it as formulas? We use identical tracts and prepackaged approaches on everyone we want to share Christ with. Paul teaches us a different method. He teaches us to know the people we're reaching out to, to understand where they're coming from. Michael Green says this: "Paul would not have tolerated the middle class captivity of the church in the Western world. He would have been as active in evangelizing skinheads as undergraduates. He would have been as much at home talking of Christ in a bar or at a dinner party."

Those who study missions talk about "the contextualization of the gospel." That means being willing to change the form of the gospel message without compromising the content. All the world's eyes are on what's happening in the Middle East right now. There is such a great divide in our world between the Christian faith and Islam. Muslim's see Christianity as a materialistic, Western religion. Most of them believe to become a Christian would mean giving up their culture and becoming westernized. More and more, Christians reaching out to them are trying to communicate that's not true. They can remain culturally Muslim, but embrace Christ as Savior and Lord. They can still pray at times and in postures common to Islam, use houses of worship that resemble mosques in appearance, dress in traditional Muslim garb, even use the generic term of Allah for God. And it's working. Many Muslims are coming to Christ under that approach.

I think Paul would have understood that. It's like Paul would go to any lengths to bring a person to Christ. I like how Haddon Robinson puts it. He says Paul would do anything short of sinning to win a man or woman to Christ. That was his perspective.

### **Paul would do anything short of sinning to win people for Christ.**

Someone might come along and say, "You don't win them, Paul, God does." Paul says, I act like I win them. Over and over again he uses the first-person singular. He doesn't say God wins them, he says "I win them." "But Paul, what about the Holy Spirit? Unless he draws a person near and opens their heart they can never believe." Paul says, "I know that, but I go after people as if it were up to me. I'll do anything short of sinning to win a person to Christ."

Someone else might say, "But Paul, you're an apostle. You have the gift of evangelism. I don't have that calling. I don't have that gift. I don't even know what to say to people." But Jesus said to all of us, "You shall be my witnesses." You don't have to have the gift of evangelism to be a witness. What does a witness do? He tells what has happened to him. He says, "This is my story. I was blind but now I see."

I had a conversation with a woman recently who asked me a question about our upcoming Love Works Sunday. She asked, "When we're out there helping people in the community, is it okay for us to tell them about Jesus? Do you guys believe in evangelism?" It was kind of a jaw-dropper for me, but I'm so glad she asked. Of course! That's the whole purpose. We're doing this to communicate to those without Christ that there is a God who loves them and sent his Son to die for them. I said, "You have my permission to speak of Christ!"

### **Conclusion**

Years ago, Jim McKay would begin the program *Wide World of Sports* by talking about "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat." In the Games there is the agony of losing. Once again, Paul wants us to know just because you're running doesn't mean you're going to win. He talks of being disqualified. He knows he can't lose his salvation, but he can lose his reward. How could that happen? Only if he brought the wrong perspective and went about it in a halfhearted way.

In 1980, Rosie Ruiz, a 23-year-old New Yorker, was the first woman to cross the finish line in the Boston Marathon. She had achieved the third fastest time ever recorded for a female runner, which was made all the more remarkable by the fact that she

looked almost sweat-free and relaxed as she climbed the winner's podium to accept her wreath. But race officials almost immediately began to question her victory.

The problem was no one could remember having seen her during the race. Monitors at the various race checkpoints hadn't seen her, nor had any of the other runners. Photographs taken during the race failed to contain any sign of her. Finally, a few members of the crowd came forward to reveal that they'd seen her jump into the race during its final half-mile. Apparently she had then simply sprinted to the finish line.

Of course she was disqualified. You and I are disqualified if we think we can pretend to run this race, but not really put in effort and discipline needed to run the whole thing from start to finish well. Paul didn't want that. God doesn't want that for any of us. He wants all of us to win. We're not in competition with one another. Everyone who has this perspective and gives themselves to winning the lost receives the prize. That's the thrill of victory. He describes an "imperishable wreath." This isn't just the thrill of seeing men and women come to Christ, but the thrill of standing before the Lord one day and having him put a crown on your head.

But it costs. Just because you're running doesn't mean you'll win the prize. Like Paul, you must have the right perspective. You have to be willing to give up your rights and your comfort level, you have to be willing to do anything short of sinning to win men and women to Christ.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*