

The Seriousness of Salvation - 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Introduction

Have you ever needed to be rescued? I remember a time I needed to be rescued during a family holiday to Queensland when we were kids. My brother and I were swimming in the beach when suddenly I realised, I was out too far, and the current seemed too hard to swim against. Freaking out, I yelled out to my brother who was a couple of years older than me, to come and rescue me.

He looked at me from a distance.... Then turned around just started walking in the other direction towards the beach. Now, in that moment I thought, “you heartless monster!” I’m drowning out here, and you just walk off!?”

But in his head, in that moment, he thought, “I’ve got to save Chris, but I also don’t want to get stuck where he is, so I’ll go get an adult. I’ll go get Dad.” And that’s what I saw him do, when he got to the sand, he ran to Dad, who jumped up, ran in, swam out and helped me back to shore. I remember my brother proudly telling everyone after that incident, how he had followed his PE teachers advise to a tee. Don’t try and be a hero when it comes to the water. You need to think about their well-being, and think about your wellbeing.

And there’s a similar message in our passage today. But the topic is actually much more serious than even something like water safety. God is talking to us about the seriousness of Salvation. He is talking about the desperate need we all have to be rescued by Jesus from the Judgment of God that our sin and rebellion against Him deserve. God is saying that we can’t be apathetic when it comes to either the salvation of others or the salvation of ourselves. We

need to be like my brother, who both cared about my well-being as well as his own well-being. And that's how I've broken up the text tonight.

Their salvation.

Our salvation.

1. The Seriousness of Their Salvation.

First, God wants us to wrestle with the seriousness of *their* salvation – that those who don't yet know Jesus. He wants us to be soft-hearted towards them, to care enough about their spiritual peril, that we would sacrifice our rights and our comfort, our cultural norms to bring them the gospel.

That's what you see at the start of this passage isn't it, Paul is so concerned about the salvation of the outside world, that he speaks of becoming like a slave in service to them and their spiritual need for Jesus. Look at verse 1:

¹⁹ Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people.

Every time I pop over to my neighbours house I can't help but notice that just under her door bell she has a little message that reads: "No sales people, no No religious promotion."

When Paul speaks about becoming like a slave to people in order to "win them", is he just another crafty salesman, the kind of person who comes to your front door, pretends to be interested in the flowers you have in your front garden, but ultimately wants something from you, for selfish interest? Why does he want to "win" people? Does he want their money? Is he getting commission for this somehow? Is he just some weird cult leader who wants a bunch of disciples to love and follow him?

When Paul says his goal is to “win more people” he is not speaking about getting something out of the Corinthians, but giving something to them. “Win, in this passage is kind of synonymous with the word save (in verse 22). Paul’s desire is that by sharing the message of Jesus, people might be “won” for Jesus – that is, come to faith in Him, and find forgiveness for their sin which would have otherwise place them under the holy judgment of God. Paul is not like a crafty salesman here; He is a compassionate minister of the gospel, who rightly has a sense of urgency about the spiritual needs of people. He is not out to get for himself, but give of himself in order to save as many as he can with the message of Jesus.

And that’s what we see here isn’t it? We see Paul doing what he can, or rather, *being* what he can, in order to see all kinds of people saved.

The first group of people he speaks about is the Jews. Look at verse 20:

²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law^[a]—to win those under the law.

It’s like Paul is saying, “I know I’m not justified by keeping the OT law, I know I don’t have to eat certain foods and keep certain rituals when I come into Jewish communities – but because I love them, because I don’t want to immediately turn them off, through my new Christian freedoms, I’m happy to become a slave to them. I’m okay with keeping their feasts and eating their food.”

But, it wasn't just those with the law that Paul was flexible to, it was those without the law.

You see that in verse 21:

21 To those who are without the law, like one without the law—though I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ—to win those without the law.

When mixing among the pagan peoples of the RE, Paul adapted to their cultural behaviours and interests in order to connect with them and bring the gospel to them. Now, you'll notice that Paul adds the qualification that he did not become utterly "law-less" – he was still under God's law, which he defines as the law of Christ – that is, he did not transgress, the way of life that Jesus calls Him to in the scriptures. He did not join the pagans in things like idolatry and sexual promiscuity, which were commonplace in the RE. But where, he could he adapted to them and embraced aspects of their culture. Paul demonstrates this beautifully when he is in Athens (Acts 17:23) and enters into the world of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers – engaging them in their love of philosophy and talk of religion and bringing it all to Christ.

To the Jew he became like a Jew, to the Gentile he became like a gentile, and to the weak, he became like one who is weak. Look at verse 22:

22 To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak.

Here Paul takes his readers, back to chapter 8, in which he reminded them that there were some, *in the church*, whose consciences were still not entirely informed by the scriptures – they had weak consciences in that sense. Coming out of paganism, they still thought that

eating meat sacrificed to another god could compromise the spiritually. They had not yet fully understood that Christians were free to eat such foods. Paul is saying, here as he did back in chapter 8 that the souls of those believers matter to him also. It would be awful, if somehow my thoughtless, loveless actions, in front of these believers somehow led them to become disillusioned with their new faith and walk away from it, before they had a chance to mature in it. That's why Paul said back in chapter 8:13:

¹³ Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall.

Because Paul takes people's salvation seriously, he is willing to do what it takes (within his obedience to Jesus) to bring them the life-saving message of Jesus. "Though I am a slave to no-one, I made myself a slave to everyone." He says the same thing a different way in verse 22-23:

I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. ²³ Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.

Paul became all things to all people, so that by all possible means he might save some.

Some of you might know the famous 19th century missionary to China – Hudson Taylor – who founded the CIM. For 51 years he gave his life to telling Chinese people about the message of salvation that came through Jesus. But what was unique about Hudson Taylor was his willingness to break with the missionary practice of other European missionaries of his time. Instead of living in the missionary compounds of designated coastal cities, he went

inland and lived among the Chinese people. Instead of living like an Englishman, he (and his team) lived like the Chinese – He embraced Chinese food, he wore Chinese clothing, he took on a Chinese hairstyle! This would have been scandalous among many Europeans of his day. But despite the scandal, he knew that in doing all this he was simply following the pattern of Paul in this passage. Which is why he told:

“Let us in everything not sinful become like the Chinese, that by all means we may save some.”

Taylor, wanted there to be no confusion. He was not coming to impose Western culture (which many Chinese were wary of), but a saving gospel. And in God’s kindness, the missionary zeal and thoughtfulness of Hudson Taylor resulted in thousands of conversions, and an explosion of mission activity within China.

But it’s not just the missionaries who are to take this passage seriously. It’s not just the giants of evangelism like Hudson Taylor who God is speaking to in this passage. It’s all of us. Paul calls regular Christians like the Corinthians, like you and me, to follow his example. We know this because he says it at the end of 1 Cor 10:32-11:1:

³² Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, ³³ just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved.

11 Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.

Paul was simply following in the footsteps of Christ who first served us, by becoming like us in order to die for us at the cross.

So what would it look like for all of us to imitate the salvation-minded practice of Paul in this passage? I have three suggestions:

1. Cultivate a heart of compassion.

What I mean is that we need to take to heart, the real spiritual danger so many people are in. Like Paul we need a heart that genuinely cares about lost people.

Maybe you've heard of the famous magician and outspoken atheist Penn Jillette. A number of years ago he recorded a YouTube video of himself talking about an interaction he had with an audience member following a show. The audience member was a Christian man, who came up to him, talked with him, praised him for his performance and gave him the gift of a bible. And you could tell this guy actually cared about the salvation of Penn in the way *Penn* spoke about him. He said of this guy:

“He knew I was an atheist but he wasn't defensive. He looked me in the eyes and he was truly complementary, not empty flattery. He was really kind and not insane.”

Penn then went on to say how much he respected this man for sharing his faith and giving him the bible.

“I've always said, that I don't respect people that don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you and you didn't believe it —that truck was bearing down on you — there's a certain point

where I tackle you, and this is more important than that.”

I’ve always been struck by Penn Jillete’s words, because they really do highlight the need for us to genuinely care about those who do not know Jesus. They are cutting words aren’t they? How much do you have to hate someone to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that.”

I suspect most of us don’t like to think we would have hatred in our hearts. But maybe if we’re honest we are prepared to own up to a level of apathy. Now I think we all struggle in this area. It’s easy to feel guilty. But we need to know God is gracious and patient with us in all our struggles. But God’s word in this passage does need to serve as a bit of a wakeup call against the apathy we so easily have as Christian. God wants us to care about the fact that many people in our (uni course, our street, our suburb ignore and reject God and will one day face His Just Judgment – if they do not call on Jesus’ name.

We need to cultivate a heart like Paul, who in Romans 9, speaks of having a “great sorrow, and unceasing anguish in his heart,” for those who don’t know Christ. We need to cultivate compassion for those who are lost.

2. Make yourself known.

But second, we need to make ourselves known to the lost..

How can we contextualize the gospel and build relationships without taking the time to get to know non-Christians around us. One of the challenges that I think many Christians find in applying this passage is that we simply are not that close to people who aren’t Christian. Not true for everyone, but it will be for a number of us.

But I was struck by a survey that was done by the National Church life Survey group in 2021, which showed two interesting pieces of data. The first was that 3 in 10 Australians would attend a Christmas service (or other significant service) if invited by a close friend or family member. But it also showed that close to another 3 in 10 Australians, simply do not have a close friend or family member who is a Christian. What this tells me is that more people than I thought *would* probably go to our carols event if asked this year. An event where the gospel will be clearly preached. But it also told me that there are many other Aussies who simple don't know a Christian. Before we can be all things to all people, we need to be known among all people. We need to go to that random birthday invitation of a class mate. We need to stick around and chat at school drop off. We need to engage in more of that chit chat over the fence when we get out of our car in the drive way and see our neighbour in their front yard. We need to be willing to know people and build relationships if we hope to bring the gospel to them.

3. *Flexible and Faithful.*

Third, Paul shows us in this text, that we need to be flexible while faithful. And it's important to phrase it like that. Because some of us, in order to share Christ, can be end up being flexible and not faithful.

- Going out and getting drunk with your work mates on Saturday night in order to “enter into their world” might seem flexible but it's not faithful to Jesus' word.

Others of us, can be more inclined to be faithful without thinking too much about being flexible.

- The Faithful, but inflexible believer might be more inclined to wait for someone to come into their world (like church) rather than thinking of how they might enter into the world of those who do not know Christ.

I think we all tend towards one side of this equation. When I was doing footy chaplaincy a number of years ago, I noticed my own tendency to be faithful, without being entirely flexible. That is, I was very aware of my need to remain faithful to Jesus in a very secular context. I would pray on the way to training, that God would help me not to compromise the message if I got an opportunity to speak about Jesus. I would not go along with words, behaviours, that were unhelpful and ungodly. But I can't really remember asking God to help me be more flexible. I can't really remember asking that God would give me more of an interest in local footy, more knowledge of who the players are – what they liked and disliked.

But Paul is helping us see the need to be flexible, *while* remaining faithful, in order to love the lost and bring the message of Jesus' salvation into their lives.

Now I suspect some of you might struggle to know where the line is between flexible and faithful? Well, really the only way to find that out is to know more and more, the law of Christ. This is why coming to church is important. This is why GG is so helpful. This is why daily devotions are crucial. They help you know what it is to be faithful, so that you know how to rightly be flexible.

But it's not just the salvation of other people God is wanting us to take seriously. It's our own salvation. And that's our second point.

2. The Seriousness of Our Salvation.

Many of you will be familiar with the famous evangelist Billy Graham. Throughout much of the 20th century, Billy graham went from country to country and preached the gospel to stadiums pack with thousands of people. In fact Billy Graham's 1959 appearance in Melbourne still holds the record for the largest crowd at the MCG – 143,000.

You may be less familiar, however, with Charles Templeton, who was with Billy Graham as a co-preacher in his earlier evangelistic tours. Sadly, in the late 50s, Charles Templeton turned his back on the gospel of Jesus which he had proclaimed to thousands of others.

Many years later, Lee Strobel interviewed Templeton for Strobel's book "Case for faith." In the book Strobel speaks about meeting Templeton a couple of years before he died and asking him what he thought of Jesus at this later point in his life. Strobel records the conversation like this:

"In my view," [Templeton] eclared, "he is the most important human being who has ever existed."

That's when Templeton uttered the words I never expected to hear from him. "And if I may put it this way," he said as his voice began to crack, 'I . . . miss . . . him!"

With that tears flooded his eyes. He turned his head and looked downward, raising his left hand to shield his face from me. His shoulders bobbed as he wept. . . .

Templeton fought to compose himself. I could tell it wasn't like him to lose control in front of a stranger. He sighed deeply and wiped away a tear. After a few more awkward moments, he waved his hand dismissively. Finally, quietly but adamantly, he insisted: "Enough of that."

Isn't that sad? On the one hand there is a residual grief about *losing* Jesus, on the other hand, a there is resolute commitment to the decision he made – "enough of that!". Templeton started his adult life as a famous evangelist, he ended it as a committed agnostic.

This story reminds us that it's not so much how you *start* in the Christian life, but how you *finish*. Will you still be loving Jesus, clinging to Him, looking forward to his glorious promises at the end of your life. Or will you find yourself like Charles Templeton, alienated from Jesus and His promise of salvation.

It's not so much how you start as a Christian, but how you finish. The Christian life is like a race, that you need to keep going at, in order to glory in the wonderful prize of salvation that Christ has won for you. That's what Paul is saying in these final verses – take your own salvation seriously! Verse 24:

24 Don't you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize.

The Corinthians would have been very familiar with the world of athletics – ancient events like the Olympic games were loved by Greeks. And so Paul takes the image of the sporting arena, and uses it as a metaphor for the Christian life.

But, it's important to note, here what Paul is *not* saying. He isn't saying that as Christians we are in competition with each other. He isn't saying that only one of us, is ultimately going to receive the prize of Heaven. We know from the book of Revelation that Heaven is filled with a multitude of people from every tribe, nation and language that cannot be counted (Rev 7:9). What Paul is saying is that we need to have the kind of determination to finish the race and enjoy the prize that the runner in the stadium does. We need to think, I'm running to finish. I'm not going to let go of Jesus, because I want to be with Him in His kingdom, and enjoy the prize of His salvation.

But how do we make it to the end and not drop out along the way? Paul says, this requires a level of thoughtfulness in your Christian life. Like an athlete, the Christian has to think about

what will sustain them in their event? What will help to keep them going and not lose heart?

Look at verse 25:

²⁵ Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown.

Did you know that winners in the famous Isthmian games (held in Corinth) every two years received a crown made of Celery? I found that hilarious in my preparation. These ancient runners, boxers, athletes, got the wonderful privilege of wearing a crown made of celery! Paul's helping us to see the laughable difference between the prize of the athlete and the prize of the Christian who perseveres. One could be used in a salad. The other is an eternity with living God, in new heavens and earth. Which would you rather win?

“Keep your eyes on the prize of your salvation says Paul – and keep doing what will sustain you to keep going.” Verse 26:

²⁶ So I do not run like one who runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air. ²⁷ Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

Paul didn't want to end up like Charles Templeton, he didn't want to find himself as one who had preached a saving message to others, yet ultimately failed to himself believe that message – all because he stopped taking the health of his own faith seriously. God wants that for us also. God doesn't just want you to begin trusting Jesus, He wants us to finish trusting Jesus.

How do we apply Paul's words about the seriousness of our own salvation? Let me leave you with three final points of application.

1. Have a humble view of yourself.

The first is to embrace a humble view of yourself. Every smart athlete takes the idea of being disqualified from the competition seriously. You and I all need to say, "I am not as spiritually strong as I think I am. I am not as able to resist temptation as I think I am. *I* could be a Charles Templeton and wander away from God if I stop taking my faith in Jesus and my salvation seriously. Paul says in Romans 12:3 not to think of yourselves more highly than you ought, but to think of yourself with sober judgment.

That is the humble view that I think Paul projects in verses 24-27. Paul would not talk about the risk of being "disqualified" if he didn't believe it could happen to him. We likewise need to think that if we are not careful *we* could drift into wrong theology, *we* could fall into catastrophic sin that ruins us, *we* could succumb to the pressures of the world around us. We need a similarly humble view of ourselves, so that we will see the need to rely on God and be disciplined. Which is the second point.

2. Be disciplined.

The undisciplined athlete (who ignores his fitness, sits on the couch and eats KFC) doesn't make it to the finish line. The disciplined athlete knows that certain things are necessary to make it to the end. Certain training, habits, self-control.

And it's the same for us. If you care about your salvation. If you want to last for the long haul in your Christian life, you'll also cultivate, certain disciplines/habbits that will help sustain you. There are many to mentioned but here's a few:

- The disciplined Christian says church and GG is important – “If I want to last for the long haul, I need the regular support of my brothers and sisters. I need to sit under and learn from the teaching of God’s word.”
- The disciplined Christian says prayer is important – “If I want to last for the long haul, I need to ask for God’s help.” We can’t do this on our own, but He gives us His Spirit so to help us/sustain us/preserve us in all the ups and downs.
- The disciplined Christian says daily bible reading is important – “If I want to last for the long haul, I need God’s word –I need to know what God makes of my life and the world around me, what hope he gives me in Jesus, what wisdom he offers in my day to day living.
- The disciplined Christian says we are in a marathon not a sprint. Trying to sprint your way through a marathon will wear you out well before the end. You’ll either collapse and throw in the towel, or you’ll find that much of the race is spent struggling, limping, gasping for breath. Sometimes, being disciplined in the Christian life requires us to slow down, catch our breath, and remember we are finite. There is a limit on how many good things you can do. A limit on how many people you can help. To go beyond that limit won’t be good for you or for anyone else. We need to remember the wisdom of my brothers PE teacher. “Don’t try and be a hero when it comes to people in need of rescue.” People already have a hero, and He is Jesus. And He wants you to last, not to burn out – either in your ministry or (worse) your faith.

3. Keep your eyes on the Prize.

Finally, we take our salvation seriously, as we keep our eyes on the prize. Paul repeatedly calls us to do that here – twice he speaks of the prize the athlete receives, twice he speaks of a

crown. Jesus has assured us, that as we trust Him we too are running towards a sure and certain prize.

In Philippians 3 God tells us not to set their minds on earthly things but to remember that our citizenship is in Heaven and that we eagerly await a saviour from there. We run the Christian life with Heaven in view. We look forward to that glorious day when our saviour will welcome us into His eternal kingdom which last forever and ever. Free from the all the grief, pain, injustice anxiety, and fear that are hall marks of the world we live in now.

I'll finish with the words of the 18th Century preacher, Jonathan Edwards, which I know I've shared before.

“Lord, stamp eternity on our eyeballs.”

Help us to remember that there is eternal judgment and eternal life. Heaven and Hell.

Help us to keep our eyes on the prize of heaven – which Jesus has won for us by his death and resurrection. Help us to so long for *that* day that we keep holding on to Jesus *this* day.

It's only as we keep before us the reality of eternity, that we will be like Paul in this passage – someone who takes seriously the salvation of others. Someone who takes seriously his own salvation. Let's pray.