**All Things to All Men (Life of Incarnation)** Feb 28, 2021

1Corinthians 8:1-9:27 Key Verse 9:22, “To the weak, I have become weak, to win the weak, I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”

In today’s passage, Paul explains how to use the precious gift of freedom that Jesus gave us. Freedom delights our soul and gives us great joy. However, if not used properly, freedom can be a stumbling block to happiness and ministry. Paul teaches how to use freedom properly to build a healthy Christian community. For this lesson, Paul gives his own example. Paul’s example is exactly following our Lord Jesus’ example. In short, it is to become all things to all men. It is exactly the life of Incarnation which our Lord Jesus showed in his life. So let’s learn this precious principle of incarnation through Paul and our Lord Jesus Christ. May God bless each of us to learn how to use our freedom through today’s passage!

1. **Knowledge Puffs up, but Love Builds Up (8:1-13)**

Thus far in his letter, Paul has answered various questions about Christian life. He now turns to the matter of food sacrificed to idols. In doing so, Paul really addresses the issue of how to use freedom in a Christian community. Our contemporary society has no issue about food sacrificed to idols but in Paul’s time, it was a common issue. In Paul’s time, people especially in Corinth sacrificed lots of animals to worship their Greek and Roman gods. Then the meat sacrificed for their idols was later sold in the marketplace. It was often sold at reduced prices, and so many poor brothers and sisters wanted to buy it for dinner. This, however, raised a question of conscience: *was it right for Christians to eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol*?

In verse 1, Paul lays down the principle that freedom must be limited by love. Knowledge is precious and important, but without love, it makes one proud and harmful to others. Love on the other hand, builds up others. Paul compares knowledge and love to emphasize the supremacy of love. This principle is the principle that we should learn in every aspect of our life.

From verse 4, Paul starts to deal with the question raised in the church. Paul says, “We know that ‘An idol is nothing at all in the world and there is no God but one.’” The Greek and Roman gods were just man’s imagination-made product. They are not real gods at all who rule the world. Those who heard the gospel and accepted the truth of the gospel came to know that there is only one God, one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom they live and idols are nothing at all in the world. However, not everyone knew this. Some believers in Corinthian church believed in Jesus, yet did not accept that idols are nothing. They were still so accustomed to idols that when they ate sacrificed food, they thought of it as having been sacrificed to a god and since their conscience was weak, it was defiled. Paul calls them weak brothers and sisters (7, 11; Ro 14:2); who were most likely recent converts or younger believers who had not experienced the freedom of the gospel deeply yet. For them, it was very hard to live in Corinth. Their family members may have worshiped idols. Their social gatherings like wedding ceremony, festivals, public holidays were all related to idol worship. They saw the temple of Apollo daily. They had to see Aphrodite’s temple and the people going to and from it every day. It was a real challenge for them not to fall back into their old habit. Christians cannot maintain the Christian lifestyle by themselves, especially in their former godless culture. They need healthy Christian fellowship in order to have a place of refuge and to grow spiritually and experience the love of God deeper to become stronger Christians.

However, when weak Christian saw strong Christians eating whatever they wanted freely by even participating in idol feasts such as reception after wedding ceremony, they became confused and they could be emboldened to eat what was sacrificed to idols. To the strong Christians, it was OK. But to the weak Christians, their conscience became troubled later after eating the food sacrificed to idols. Probably they could be harassed by the devil’s accusation and suffer from guilty conscience. In verse 12, Paul concludes how strong Christian’s careless exercise of their freedom could cause their weak brothers and sisters for whom Christ died to be destroyed in their conscience by their knowledge without love. He says, “When you sin against them in this way, you sin against Christ.” What was Paul’s decision then? In verse 13, he says, “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.” This is exactly how all strong Christians should exercise their freedom in a Christian community.

In a Christian community, there are always both the strong Christians and the weak Christians. The strong Christians are the ones who have studied the bible much and have strong conviction about the spiritual truth. On the other hand, the weak Christians are usually recent converts or young Christians who have not studied the bible much yet and have no strong conviction about the spiritual truth yet. The weak Christians can be very sensitive to certain issues or the kinds of conversations or opinions that they hear expressed around them. In Canada, certain group of people are very cautious about food based on their cultural and religious background; Jews and Muslims never eat pork and those who have Hinduism background never eat beef. Canada is known as multi-cultural mosaic culture country which respects each ethnic group’s former cultural background. However, no matter what diversity exists, the basic principle we should learn here is that in order to build up those who have weak faith, the believers who have strong faith need to serve them as they are with careful love not to hurt or harm them by the careless exercise of their freedom. When weak Christians are nurtured in this way by strong Christians, their church community can grow as a healthy loving community which pleases God. Paul said twice elsewhere in this letter (6:12; 10:23), “*Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial*.” This means that the exercise of our freedom should be selective; selective to build up others; selective to the best benefit for others. This is how we use our freedom and knowledge within God’s Agape love.

**II. How to use freedom from Paul’s example (9:1-27)**

In this chapter, Paul shares his own example of how he avoided the use of his own rights and used his freedom to build up Christ’s community. As a human being and an apostle, Paul had certain rights. Paul had not been with Jesus during his earthly messianic ministry but received his call to be an apostle directly from the Risen Jesus. Paul’s apostleship was clear by the evident work of God among the Corinthian believers. As an apostle, Paul had a right to food and drink (4). Paul had a right to take a believing wife along with him wherever he went (5). As a pastor, Paul also had a right to receive material support from the church.

In verses 7-14, Paul defends the fact that some are worthy to receive support from both a human and Scriptural point of view. From a human point of view, Paul gave three examples: a soldier, a farmer, and a herdsman. There is no soldier who serves as a soldier at his own expense. There is no farmer who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grape. There is no herdsman who tends a flock and does not drink the milk. Then why not Paul only? Paul also gave two examples from a Scriptural point of view: oxen who tread the grain and temple servants (Dt 25:4; Lev 7:28-36). Paul also referred to Jesus’ own teaching (Lk10:7). All of these examples clearly teach that Paul had a right to many things which he did not use, including material support from the Corinthians. However, Paul did not use any of these rights.

Paul goes on to explain his personal operating philosophy. He did not want to do anything that might hinder the gospel of Christ (12b). This means that if only he could preach the gospel of Christ, he was always willing to sacrifice his own freedom and right. And even though he was always willing to sacrifice his own freedom and right to preach the gospel of Christ freely, he said that he could not boast because he was compelled to do so: he really felt that if he did not preach the gospel, there should be woe to him. What made Paul think and feel in this way? The answer comes in verse 18. Paul says, “What then is my reward? Just this: that *in preaching* *the gospel* I may *offer it free of charge*, and so *not make full use of my rights* as *a preacher of the gospel.”* Offering the gospel free of charge and not making full use of his rights as a preacher of the gospel is really very graceful and sacrificial love. What is gospel? Gospel is grace; wonderful and unimaginable grace. Gospel is sacrifice; marvelous and unfathomable sacrifice. Paul received such wonderful and marvelous grace and sacrificial love from the gospel of Jesus Christ. He knew how much Jesus forgave his sin; he knew how much he already received the grace of forgiveness of sins and how much it is privileged reward for him to be called to preach the gospel. He knew how much Jesus loved him by sacrificing himself on the cross to save a wretched sinner; a persecutor and murderer like him. When he knew all of these grace and love and reward of such high calling, he couldn’t stop preaching the gospel. He knew that to stop preaching such wonderful graceful gospel is to bring woe to himself. To him, preaching the gospel is the most precious and urgent thing giving salvation and life to all people.

So, for the sake of the gospel, even though he was free and belong to no one, *he voluntarily made* *himself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible*. In verses 20-23, He says, “to the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” It is really amazing that Paul could make himself a slave to everyone to become all things to all people for the sake of the gospel. What Paul is doing his best to become all things to all people is exactly following the spirit of the gospel of incarnation which Jesus exactly showed in his life.

As you know Jesus is the first one to practice the principle of becoming all things to all people; so called the life of incarnation. Jesus was originally the Son of God who had the glory and honor in heaven. But to save sinners like us he gave up his privilege and glory in heaven and he came down to earth as a human. He came as a baby in a manger; most humble way among men. To Nicodemus, a typical intellectual and a proud orthodox Jew, Jesus became like a Jew. To a wayward broken Samaritan woman, he became like a close friend. Jesus became the eyes to the blind and the ears to the deaf. Jesus became a true friend to all the lonely sinners and finally Jesus gave his very life as a ransom on the cross to be all things to all men.

While I was preparing this message, one hymn (#224-My Savior’s love) struck my heart because the content of the hymn really described today’s lesson: the life of incarnation very consciously and powerfully. Especially verses 2 and 4 go like these; “*For me it was in the garden He prayed*, “*Not My will, but Thine.” He had no tears for His own griefs. But sweat-drops of blood for mine***.** How marvelous, How wonderful! And my song shall ever be: How marvelous, How wonderful! Is my Savior’s love for me!... *He took my sins and my sorrows; He made them His very own. He bore the burden to Calvery, And suffered, and died alone*.” Here, the lyrics, “**He had no tears for his own griefs. But sweat-drops of blood for mine. He took my sins and my sorrows; He made them His very** **own**” really touched and captured my heart because these words really described my Savior’s love for me most consciously and powerfully and also this song really summed up today’s lesson; how to use our freedom and right in our Christian community.

As this song says, true love is emptying ourselves; emptying our freedom and our right in order to build up others. True love is adjusting ourselves to others’ level to be their true helper and friend. True love is always putting others’ benefit ahead of ours. When we practice such true love, our life is used to build up others and is known by God, which is most worthy and greatest life we can live. I personally thank God who led my life to know and learn Jesus who has been teaching the most honorable and greatest life – emptying myself; emptying my freedom and right to serve others in Christ. I pray I may follow Jesus’ example of incarnation for the rest of my life so that I can be know by him.

In conclusion, we learned how to use our freedom and right to build up others through Paul’s example. In Christ we have freedom. But let’s remember that this freedom which Jesus gave at the cost of his very life was not meant to be used only for our own selfish pleasure or benefit but it was meant to be used to build up others. This is how we practice the love of God. Anyone who loves God by loving others is known by God.

**Big idea: Let’s use our freedom to build up others in love!**