

“For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:16–23, ESV)

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I have used the picture on the screen this morning other times in the past (please show it for those online). This is a painting by Lucas Cranach, and it is the lower part of the altarpiece in St. Mary’s Church in Wittenberg, Germany. It is one of my favourite paintings, as it shows Luther preaching the message of the crucified Christ to the people in the congregation. For me, this painting is a constant reminder of the chief task of my ministry and the focus of that ministry. In His grace, God called me to be a pastor and to preach the Gospel. He uses my humble service, and the service of faithful shepherds, to bring the good news of the crucified and risen Christ to the people of His church and beyond.

Someone asked me recently if it is hard to preach. While it is not always easy to prepare a sermon, preaching is never a hardship; if anything, I find that *not* preaching is the hardship! One of the greatest joys of ministry is being given the privilege of bringing God’s Word of life and truth to His people. I have often heard Christians say that it just doesn’t seem like Sunday unless they get to church. I think that most pastors would say it just doesn’t feel like Sunday unless they have the chance to preach a sermon. I have to admit that I can be somewhat restless when I am just sitting in a pew on Sunday morning.

When we look at our text today, that would definitely be the way that St. Paul felt. He says that when it comes to preaching, *necessity is laid upon me*. Or, as another translation puts it, *“For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.”* (1 Corinthians 9:16, NASB) Paul does not say that as if preaching were a terrible burden or a joyless task. He does not think of preaching the way that a teenager feels about taking out the garbage. I believe Paul felt like the prophet Jeremiah, who said: *“If I say, “I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,” there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”* (Jeremiah 20:9, ESV) What is even more telling of Paul’s desire to preach are the lengths he will go to in order to proclaim the good news of Jesus. He says: *“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”*

That, dear friends, is the way that not just pastors, but every Christian should feel about the gospel of Jesus Christ. That wonderful message of hope, forgiveness and life through which the Holy Spirit has brought us to faith and life in its fulness, is not something to be kept bottled up inside us. It must be proclaimed. It must be shared, And we should want to do whatever it takes to get that message out to a lost and dying world. As those who have experienced the joy and power of the Gospel, we, too, should desire to do all things for the sake of that Gospel, so that by every means possible we, too, may lead some to the life the Spirit gives through faith in Christ.

Most people are familiar with the Frank Sinatra song entitled, “My Way”. I believe that was even the title of a biography of his life. Those simple words, “my way” are the battle cry of so many in our world today. That shouldn’t surprise us as we look at the world of selfishness and self-centeredness in which we live. But there are times when that same attitude is typical of the way we approach our life in the church. Instead of doing all things for the sake of others, we claim our rights, our authority. We think that our way is best, and so we have very little patience for those who think differently than we do. The older members of the church may not like it when younger or newer members come in and want to do new and different things. They have no right to change things—after all, who do they think they are? Can’t they see my way is best? And the younger members have no patience or respect for the long-standing traditions or procedures of the church. Sometimes they want change for the

sake of change, without learning or seeing the beauty and glory of the things that we have treasured for centuries. They, too, may think, “Can’t the other members see that my way is best?” Maybe we don't mean to have these attitudes, but they do show up, both in our actions and in our words. We don't want to have to change or compromise. We don't want to have to bring ourselves down to someone else's level, or accommodate ourselves to their way of thinking. We simply think too much of ourselves and not enough about others. Like Sinatra sang, we do it our way—or we won't do it at all.

But Paul had a very different approach to his ministry. He tells us: ***For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.***

Paul had every right to claim a certain position of privilege. He was an apostle, called by the Lord, a man given a special revelation by God. He was well educated, truly faithful to his Lord, and a dynamic missionary. But Paul neither flaunts his ability nor his position. He does not claim the privilege he has. Instead he makes every effort to be all things to all people. Paul was willing to give of himself to accommodate the thinking and the attitudes of those he dealt with, in as far as these things did not violate the commands of God—even if that meant giving up some of his personal freedom. He was understanding, open and accepting of all the different people around him. When he was with people who abided by the ceremonial law, he did not say that he was free from the law, rather he conformed to that law in things like eating kosher foods. When he was with those who did not know the ceremonial law and such things as kosher foods, then he met them on their own level, never forgetting that he still must be subject to the law of God. When he was with those who were weak in faith, he remembered that they still needed to grow and learn the freedom of the Gospel. One of the vicars who served at my parent's church years ago had a beard, and there was one member of the church who didn't like the beard. She complained to the pastor who then asked the vicar what he would do. The vicar agreed to shave off his beard for the weaker member, although he had every right to keep it. Like Paul, he was willing to become a slave to the feeling of others even in a matter so unimportant as this.

But why? Why should we have to set aside our rights and privileges and, as Paul says, make ourselves slaves to the feelings of others? Paul says it quite well in our text: ***I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.*** Paul did it all for the Gospel. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says: ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”*** (Romans 1:16, ESV) It was the Gospel that brought Paul, who once was a persecutor of the church, the sure and certain hope of salvation. It was the Gospel that declared that he, who had tried in vain to earn his salvation, was saved because of the Saviour who died on the cross for his sins and who rose from the dead to bring him life. It was for this Gospel that Paul says he makes himself a slave to all to win as many as possible.

Isn't that exactly what we see in Christ Himself? The Gospel is the message of how the eternal Son of God set aside all His power, privilege and glory for the sake of sinners like you and me. Paul reminds us: ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”*** (2 Corinthians 8:9, ESV) Christ was not ashamed to leave His glory and to become all things for all men by taking on human flesh and blood and by dying for us on the cross. He, who was worshipped and served by angels, is not ashamed to come as the servant of all. He comes down to us. He lowers Himself to be one of us. He willingly gives His holy life for sinners like us. He then conquers death as He rises to life so that we might share in His glory and in the life that only He can give.

Paul knew what Christ had done for him, and that was the reason he had to share that good news. He would do anything for the Gospel, because those who have the joy of salvation want to share that joy with others. I pray that this is true of all the pastors of our dear Lutheran Church—Canada. I pray that it is true of each member of our church. That Gospel, which is life for all who believe, is needed so desperately in our world. That is why Jesus says in the Gospel lesson today ***“Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.”*** (Mark 1:38, ESV) He has come to preach the Gospel—because everyone needs that Gospel. It is needed by terrorists, murderers and all who have no regard for life. It is needed by the warmongers, who think force is the answer to everything. It is needed by the scientists who think that wisdom holds all the answers for life. It is needed by the lonely and the hurting, who have no hope. It is needed by the wealthy, and it is needed by the poor. And Christ charges us with the task of bringing that Gospel to others.

Are we ready to do everything for the sake of the Gospel? Someone has suggested that Christians should approach their lives with JOY - meaning Jesus, Others, and Yourself. That fits well with what Paul tells us in our text. Our JOY begins with Jesus,

the Saviour who has redeemed us from sin and death and given us the joy of life as His people. As we rejoice in all He has done for us, we also see the opportunity He has given us to reach out to *O*thers with the gospel. Paul reminds us that our mission to others is most effective when we seek to *become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some*. As we think a little more of others and a little less of ourselves, we will still be the ones who gain, because there will be joy in seeing the life-changing gospel at work in others. That blessed participation in the gospel will be a blessing to *You*, too, as we find the joy of sharing together in the best news of all—the message of a Saviour who lives to bless us with life forever. Amen.