

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 25, 2007**

ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

It was a daily battle. A wrestling match. A classic test of wills. Every day, at exactly the same time, as Kevin Harvey describes it in his book *Seismic Shifts*, a woman named Margaret would go to the bathroom cabinet and take out a huge bottle of castor oil. Then she would head to the kitchen to get a tablespoon. At the sound of the drawer opening and the silverware rattling, Patches, her Yorkshire terrier, would run and hide – sometimes under the bed, at other times in the bathtub or behind Margaret’s recliner. Patches knew what was coming.

Someone had convinced Margaret that her beloved dog would have strong teeth, a beautiful coat, and a long life if she gave him a spoonful of castor oil every day. So, as an act of love every 24 hours, Margaret would corner Patches, pin him down, pry open his mouth, and, as he whimpered, squirmed and fought her with all his strength, she would pour a tablespoon of castor oil down his little doggie throat. Neither Patches nor Margaret enjoyed this daily wrestling match.

Then one day, it happened, as it was bound to happen eventually. In the middle of their battle royal, with one sideways kick, Patches sent the dreaded bottle of castor oil flying across the kitchen floor. It was a momentary victory for the dog, as Margaret let him go so she could run to the pantry and grab a towel to clean up the mess.

When Margaret returned to the scene of the crime, she was shocked by what she saw. There was Patches, licking up the castor oil with a look of satisfaction only a dog can make. Margaret began to laugh uncontrollably. Suddenly she understood Patches actually liked castor oil. What he didn’t like – what he hated, in fact – was being pinned down and having it poured down his throat.

This is, if you will, a parable of evangelism. It is true that some people find the message of the gospel to be distasteful or offensive. They resist it and reject it, they want nothing to do with it and may even actively fight against it because they do not like the message of the gospel and its implications. But for others, like Patches and his castor oil, it is not that they find the gospel itself offensive. What they dislike is being pinned down by a well-intentioned evangelist and having the gospel shoved down their throats.

That is not the way Paul went about the ministry of evangelism. It is not the way Paul went about sharing the good news of the gospel with those who did not yet know Christ. In the verses we read this morning from 1 Corinthians 9, Paul articulates the strategic principle underlying his approach to evangelism. He says:

To the Jews I became like a Jew.

To those under the law I became like one under the law

(though I myself am not 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)...

To the weak I became weak.

I have become all things to all men...(9:20-22).

All things to all people. That was Paul's strategy. It wasn't his style to ambush people with the gospel or to pin them down and shove the gospel down their throats against their will. It was a strategy of identifying with people where they are in order to remove as many hindrances or barriers to their acceptance of the gospel as possible. I'll say more about this strategy of Paul's in a few minutes.

For the moment, I want you to consider the question: What was Paul's motive or purpose in seeking to become "all things to all people"?

First, it was not a strategy designed to please men or to win men's praise. That is not what it was about. Paul makes this clear over in 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6, where he says:

The appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.

Eugene Peterson says, Paul wasn't after crowd approval, only God approval.

Again, over in Galatians 1, after excoriating the Galatians for their fickleness and warning them of the consequences of perverting the gospel message, Paul says in verse 10:

Am I now trying to win the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

In other words, if Paul's goal was popularity or personal prestige in the public eye, being a servant of Christ would not be the way to achieve it. His motive was not to please men or to win their praise.

Second, he didn't seek to become all things to all people in order to make the message of the gospel more appealing to the tastes of his audience, whoever his audience happened to be. Paul didn't change his message to make it more acceptable to his hearers. He adjusted his approach when he was with different groups of people in order to make connections and to remove any unnecessary hindrances to the gospel that might get in the way. But he did not change the message in order to fit in with the prevailing moral climate of his day.

Sadly, the fatal flaw in too many “mainline” Protestant denominations has been their willingness – in some cases, eagerness – to abandon the gospel and key tenets of the Christian faith in an attempt to be perceived as culturally relevant and up-to-date. So they dismiss clear biblical teaching on such central matters as sin and salvation, sexuality and marriage, and the uniqueness, sufficiency and Lordship of Jesus Christ. This rejection of biblical teaching and the accommodation of the church’s message to contemporary culture have led to the current crises in The Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church USA, among others.

Too many churches have tried to become all things to all people by adapting their message and altering their values in order to fit in and be accepted in the climate of their culture. In doing so they have compromised the gospel and central truths of the Christian faith.

Paul would never do that. He would never compromise when it came to the truth of the gospel. He would never compromise with respect to the essentials of the Christian faith. And he would never compromise in the area of Christian morality.

Our challenge is to be like Paul and to make sure, as a church, that we do not in any way compromise the gospel or the teaching of God’s Word for the sake of popularity, convenience, or “relevance” to our culture.

If it wasn’t to make his message more appealing to the culture of his day, and if it wasn’t for the praise and applause of men, what was Paul’s motive for becoming all things to all people? He gives us the answer in verses 22 and 23:

I have become all things to all men 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.

He did it, he says, for the sake of the gospel, which Paul knew in his own life and declared in Romans 1:16 to be “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,” both Jew and Gentile alike. Having experienced the life-transforming power of the gospel in his own life, Paul wanted to get in on the blessing of sharing it with others. He wanted others, regardless of their backgrounds, regardless of their credentials or religion, to know the saving power of Christ in their lives.

It was the driving purpose and passion of Paul’s life. You could say that he lived a “purpose-driven life.” His purpose, as he says in verse 19, was “to win as many as possible” to Christ. He determined to become all things to all people, he says in verse 22, “so that by all possible means I might save some.”

When he says “so that...I might save some,” Paul is not suggesting that he has the power to save anyone. He is not holding himself up as a rival or alternative to Jesus in the work of salvation. He simply means: “So that by all possible means, in whatever way He chooses, God may use me as His servant to bring those I meet to saving faith in Christ.”

The desire of his heart was to be God's instrument in the ministry of the gospel in the same way that a godly aunt and John Newton were God's instruments to bring William Wilberforce to faith in Christ. So, to borrow from Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, Paul voluntarily became "a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized – whoever."

His goal was to win as many people as possible to Christ. This was not just some sort of casual endeavor for Paul. It was the passion of his life. It was the reason he got up every morning. Because he knew that God was glorified and Christ was exalted in the salvation of sinners. Nothing was more important or of greater urgency to Paul than to get the gospel out to people who needed to hear it and to point people to the Savior.

Paul was passionate about it. But he wasn't a fool. He didn't try to put God in a box. And he didn't limit himself to a single, one-size-fits-all method of relating to people or communicating the gospel. He recognized that though the message of the gospel did not change – it was and is unchanging – the methods we use to reach people may well change, as long as we don't adopt or employ methods that are in any way contrary to the teaching of God's Word. We don't have to do it the way it has always been done. We can adopt new and different methods of connecting with people and communicating the gospel to them, as long as our methods don't compromise or contradict the message in any way.

Before Billy Graham became a world-famous evangelist and Christian statesman, before he was well known nationally, in fact, he served as a field representative and speaker for *Youth for Christ International*, which had been established in 1945 as an outreach to youth and servicemen. The motto of *Youth for Christ* was "Geared to the Times, Anchored to the Rock." Billy Graham and his colleagues were determined to be on the cutting edge of cultural relevance in terms of the methods they used to connect with people. But they were anchored to the Word of God so that while their methods might change, the message would not. In their approach they could be sensitive to the backgrounds and interests and social customs of their audience, in order to win a hearing for the gospel. Just like Paul.

In Paul's case, he identified with whatever group of people he was with as fully as he could without compromising his Christian beliefs and convictions. He embraced whatever common ground he could in order to make connections.

So, when he was with Jews he voluntarily took on the restrictions of the Jewish law and lived like a Jew. Of course, Paul *was* Jewish by both birth and upbringing. But Christ, Paul knew, had set him free from the demands and requirements of the Jewish law. Paul knew that salvation was entirely of grace and could never be attained by adherence to the law. Even though Paul believed it was no longer necessary for him (or any follower of Christ) to comply with the regulations and ceremonies of the Jewish law as a matter of religious duty, he still chose to do it – voluntarily – when he was with other Jews. Why?

Simply to remove a potential stumbling block (his behavior) in the hope of bringing them to Christ.

When he was with Gentiles – those outside the law – Paul became like a Gentile. Which is to say, he did not follow all the ceremonial rules and regulations of the Jewish law. Paul would not compromise in the area of morality. Not even for a second. But in non-essential things – that is, in things not central to the Christian faith – Paul was free. He wasn't restricted or bound by the Jewish law. The law to which he was subject, he says, was not the Jewish law with all its rules and regulations and restrictions, but the law of Christ.

When he was with the weak – that is, those whose consciences were weak – Paul respected their consciences, and willingly gave up the right to anything that might get in the way of the gospel. He was determined not to place a stumbling block in their way that would make it more difficult for them either to embrace Christ in faith or to grow in faith.

Now, you may ask: Wasn't Paul being disingenuous? Wasn't he being dishonest? Wasn't he being hypocritical by acting one way with one group of people and another way with another group?

The answer is: No, because Paul remained true to the moral and spiritual principles which undergirded his life in Christ no matter who he was with. He didn't practice or promote any kind of "situation ethics." He would never compromise his own convictions or apply his "all things to all people" strategy to basic issues of morality or immorality. For example, Paul would never say: "To the drug dealer I became a drug dealer." or "To the adulterer I became an adulterer." It is in those non-essential areas of life – where the Christian has liberty – that Paul exercised his freedom to identify with those he was trying to reach with the gospel, in the hope that as many people as possible may be saved.

I don't know about you, but I find Paul's passion to reach lost people with the gospel and to bring them to Christ to be inspiring. And convicting. I'm convicted by it because I don't often, if ever, have that same level of passion burning within me. While Paul was looking for every angle, every opening, and every opportunity to connect with unbelievers, I'm usually preoccupied with a dozen other things and way too often fail to recognize that the person standing in front of me in the checkout line or the staff person at the gym is someone who matters to God and who needs the saving power of Jesus in their life. Maybe that's true for some of you, too.

Part of our mission as a church is to "share the saving love of Jesus with our neighbors." There are lots of ways to do that, but in order to reach our neighbors – not just here in Kingstowne, but for each of us in the neighborhoods where we live and the places where we work or go to school – we need to be interested enough and attentive enough to find common ground with them. To make connections with them. To get to know them. And to demonstrate, not just with our words but with our actions, that we really do care.

Someone has said: “We will never reach people until we have a passion to reach them. We will never communicate we care for them until we really do care for them.”

Paul had a passion. A passion that inspired the purpose that drove his life. He became all things to all people in order to win as many as possible to Christ.

How about you? How about us? Are you willing, like Paul, to become a servant to any and all in order to reach as many as possible for Christ? Not to pin people down in order to shove the gospel down their throats, but to meet them where they are and to love them into the Kingdom.

Only Jesus can save. May He give to each of us the passion and the privilege of being His instruments in bringing others to faith in Him.

Lord, let it be so. Beginning today. For the glory of Your name. Amen.