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1 Cor. 9:16-27  
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“That I Might Win”

Grace and peace...

Today I want to begin with a story about a famous carpenter—but not the usual one we talk about. This 51 year-old carpenter is Donald Savastano. Just after New Year’s Day, Donald Savastano walked into a convenience store at a gas station in Sydney, New York, and bought a lottery ticket. And he won a million dollars! Going public, he said to the media, “To tell you the truth, this is going to change our lives.” He said he planned to use the money to buy a new truck and save for retirement. He hadn’t been feeling well though, so he went to see a doctor and that’s when he learned he had stage 4 lung and brain cancer. On Jan. 26, three weeks after winning the lottery, Donald Savastano died. He didn’t really get to enjoy his prize! He certainly didn’t get to *keep* his prize. So he was sadly mistaken. Winning didn’t change his life because it couldn’t change his death.

Now as for the other carpenter named Jesus, we know that He has already won the ultimate victory by dying and rising and because He won, we win. His winning changed our life because it has changes our death. This is winning that lasts and for that we say “thanks be to God” or something slightly less restrained. My question is this: if eternal life has already been won, why does the Bible says

“strive to win”? Isn’t the actual winning over with? What is this conditional statement Paul makes “that I *might* win”? What is this striving for the prize that Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 9?

Paul is not striving to win eternal life and neither should you. We can’t win it. Paul is striving to win **people** that they too would share in Christ’s victory. How does he go about winning people? By being on message. By proclaiming the gospel. Verse 16, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” Because there’s no substitute for it. The gospel is “the power of God for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). It’s where the Spirit works. There’s only one gospel and it’s eternal, unchanging as it focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ. But that does not mean the Paul expressed the gospel the same way every time. Far from it! Paul changed it up! He’s not reading from the same script. Paul customized and personalized the gospel to his audience. In Acts and the epistles, we find an amazing spectrum and range of Gospel expressions depending on who Paul’s audience was.

It sounds like this: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law...that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law...that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, that I

might win the weak.” And then here comes the biggie (v. 22): “I have become **all** things to **all** people, that by **all** means, I might save *some*.”

Does that sound healthy to you, to be all things to all people? Is that even possible? Or does that sound schizophrenic. After all, we’re told: just be you, be yourself. Be honest with who you are because you can’t please everybody. All of that is true. Paul is not saying otherwise. But what he is saying is in order to communicate the Gospel, we have to put ourselves in their position, their way of thinking, their culture and values.

In our culture, it might sound like this:

To the unchurched person, I became as an unchurched person.

To the Latter Day Saint, I became as a Latter Day Saint.

Now, do you see what he means? All things to all people by all means first understanding their viewpoint. That takes work and effort, but it’s helpful if we want to win them. We have to learn their culture. We have to put ourselves in their shoes. We have to make the move. The leap of faith is hard enough, we don’t need to increase the distance.

Secondly, we should customize the Gospel to fit accordingly our audience. So we have to choose the right angle, the right approach. How do you do that?

Get to know them. Listen for the needs, for what makes them feel good, listen for the insecurity, for the fear, for the pressure. Ask. They'll tell you.

For a person who is striving to earn their salvation, to be good enough, I would zero in on how tiresome it must be to have to be under constant pressure, always feeling like there's more that could be done. That's exhausting. What would be a good Gospel in this situation? How comforting it would be for them to hear Christ say, "Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." It has to match up. Customizing allows it to match and it also makes the Gospel more varied and rich for us.

Third, have reasonable expectations. Paul didn't save all people, neither will we. But we still strive to save as many people as possible. "I have become all things to all people that by all means, I might save some." The fact is, only some people are going to receive the Gospel even though it is a free gift of God.

Elaine Newkirk, along with her husband, Jay, were my youth leaders in Hope Lutheran, Idaho Falls. Great people. I mowed their lawn. One night, when Elaine was in her 40s I believe, she went to bed and never woke up. Freak thing. Very sad. Elaine was raised Catholic so the concept of salvation by grace through faith and not by works was foreign to her. One day, it dawned on her which is to

say the Spirit showed her. She said, "Salvation has to be free, doesn't it?" She was won over.

Of those who are won over with the gospel, a smaller amount is going to understand its implications of the Gospel on how to live. In other words, not every believer goes on to become an actual disciple. Have you considered how the gospel lays claim to everything in your life and puts it under the banner of the Lord Jesus Christ? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost your life." In that discipleship, we must exercise self-control and discipline. This brings us back to 1 Corinthians 9 about how we are to live out the faith in a way that upholds the gospel, rather than discredits it. It's about holiness of living. Here Paul writes, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I don't run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified." Literally, the Greek sense is, "I pummel my body and make it a slave." I tell it who's boss. Why does he do that? So the gospel is adorned by a holy life and not discredited by scandal or immorality. I'm so glad no preacher has ever done anything to discredit the gospel (sarcasm). Depending on the offense, Paul says they are disqualified. That's just how it is. I wish it weren't so, but there's a standard here and I don't

see Paul backing away from it. He wants the Gospel to prevail and for no one to get in the way of it so he pushes self-control and discipline.

Problems arise when you do not control what is yours to control: you! Is marriage a matter of controlling the other? That sounds unhealthy and no fun, doesn't it? Ultimately, we are only in charge of our own behavior. Even in parenting, parents aren't in charge of their kid's behavior. They are in charge of providing the best environment for their kid's proper behavior. That's a big difference. We want our kids to own their behavior and choices. But they won't own it if we keep taking it away from them. Discipling works the same way. Eventually, if people are going to grow spiritually, there comes a point when they have to own their faith.

Bottom line: you are in charge of you. If you don't control you, then someone has to step in and that creates *dependency*. If you don't control you, then that's *damaging* to relationships. If you don't control you, then you eventually become *disqualified*. We want to avoid all of that. Here's the good news: we have the Holy Spirit in us guiding our thoughts, words and actions. And our being in control is really just a matter of letting Him be in control. We don't need dependency, damage or disqualification. What we do want—and I needed another “d” word here and I came up with it—we seek “da prize!”

If what we are seeking to win over is people, what is the prize that we share with them? What do they get? **The prize is Jesus.** This is really the best prize ever because He is the prize we get to keep forever. People are won. Jesus is the prize we share in. We're in the people business. God wants people to be winners in what matters most—eternity! He wanted to increase our odds to the point of making it an absolute certainty. So what is the gospel like? It's like being given a lottery ticket with the winning numbers before the drawing has even happened! And we're told: "Hold on to this. To tell you the truth, it will change your life." That's the gospel for us today, brought to you by the Idaho State Lottery Commission.

We know who's coming back and even better we know why. Because the winner and the prize belong together. Let's see how many other lives the gospel will change too. We want them to be winners also. And here it is friends: the most important line in the whole sermon: Our best shot at winning people and those that come after us isn't to make people into believers, but to make them into disciples.

In Jesus' name, Amen.