

Compelled by the Gospel

By Linda Rex

February 4, 2024, 5th Sunday in Epiphany—I've always been fascinated by the story of the apostle Paul. I've often wondered how often he heard Jesus preach and whether he was one of the people who tried to trap Jesus with questions and sought to have him killed before his crucifixion. The profound change which occurred in Paul's life when he encountered the risen Lord years later is remarkable and seems almost impossible. And still, it is beautiful to witness such a tremendous change in a person's life when it does happen.

Paul's experience of the living, resurrected Jesus was so life-altering that he began to preach the gospel he formerly had rejected. And he joined himself gladly to the group he formerly had persecuted and put in prison. He felt no shame in declaring that Jesus Christ was Lord of all, and that it was necessary to repent and be baptized in his name.

In fact, in the passage for this Sunday, 1 Corinthians 9:16–23, we find the apostle Paul declaring that he felt compelled to preach this gospel. The Mirror Bible has Paul saying, "*this Gospel has my arm twisted and locked behind my back!*" He could not be silent about what had so dramatically changed the direction of his life. And he got great satisfaction in preaching this good news at no cost to the people he served. Rather, he made himself a servant to them, adjusting himself to the needs and preferences of those around him, within the limits of his Christ-life, so that he could win new converts to Christ.

I find this passage to be challenging at times, for I wonder how well I myself have responded to the calling God has given me to share the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul calls this good news we have been given a stewardship—a responsibility for the sake of the one to whom this good news belongs. In other words, do I recall daily that my focus needs to be serving Jesus Christ and sharing his good news with others? This isn't just because I happen to have a master's degree in pastoral studies, but because I have been given God's grace and am made a participant in Christ by grace through faith. Every one of us has been given this gift—but do we share it with others?

Every one of us who has come to faith in Christ has been given the blessing and gift of the good news of Jesus. So, in that sense, we each have a stewardship of the gospel. We are made stewards of the good news of Jesus Christ, and Paul encourages us by his example to do whatever is necessary so that we can share this good news with others in such a way that they are able to understand it, experience it, and believe it. This is done through both word and deed, and as Paul demonstrates, involves meeting people where they are to bring them along with us into the embrace of the Father through Jesus in the Spirit.

I'm learning that it is easy to get wrapped up in my personal preferences when it comes to living out the gospel as I understand it. It is easy to get so locked into a particular belief system that I don't make room for someone who is struggling, or who has been wounded, or who simply needs to experience the love of God in Christ through my words and actions.

Historically, I was taught as a child to not be involved with people who weren't a part of my fellowship. In fact, I was taught to see them with suspicion and to hold them at arm's length. I find that today I have to pray fervently for God to tear down these walls and do the necessary work to bring me into relationship with people so that I can share the good news with them and show them God's love. Thankfully, God is always faithful to enable us to reach out with his love and grace when we seek his empowerment and guidance. He goes ahead of us and provides divine appointments in which to do this. I truly appreciated Dan Roger's recent sermon on this topic—I encourage you to watch it (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YOWpITjaRo>).

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Our challenge in this new year as those who follow Christ is to participate with Jesus in what he is doing today to share the good news with every person in the world. What is Jesus up to and how can we join in? Perhaps this is something we can begin to make a part of our everyday prayer life, as we listen to the Lord and seek to follow the lead of his Spirit. I would be interested in hearing from you about ways in which the Lord enabled you personally to participate in his ongoing ministry of sharing the good news with others.

Heavenly Father, thank you for including us in your life and love, through your Son Jesus Christ and in the Spirit. Lord Jesus, who would you like me to share this good news with today? How would you have me love and serve this person, these people, you have brought me into relationship with? Grant me the grace to love courageously, serve humbly, and speak boldly the words of life, in your name, empowered by your Spirit. Amen.

“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. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. What then is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”
1 Corinthians 9:16–23 NASB

“I live to preach; it consumes my total being. Your money is not going to make any difference since this Gospel has my arm twisted and locked behind my back! In fact, my life would be reduced to utter misery if it were not possible for me to preach the good news! If this was a mere career choice, then surely you could hire or fire me! But I am not for sale; I am employed by the economy of persuasion! So what’s in it for me, you may ask? The pleasure of declaring the Gospel of Christ at no expense is priceless! No, I am not cheating anyone or myself by foregoing the rights I might have as a preacher. So in a sense I am free from everyone’s expectation or management; yet I have voluntarily enslaved myself to all people. This beats any other motivation to influence people. I am like a Jew to the Jew to win them; I am disguised as a legalist to win those stuck under the law! To the Gentiles who have no regard for Jewish sentiment, I became like one without any obligation to Jewish laws to win them! Don’t get me wrong; I am not sinning to identify with the sinners! I am in the law of Christ! I am so persuaded about every person’s inclusion in Christ that I desire to be everything I need to be in order to win everyone’s understanding of their union with Christ. I do not present myself as super strong to the weak, but rather expose myself to their weakness in order to win them. I do not distance myself from anyone. My mission is to be exactly what is required of me in every possible situation to bring salvation to every kind of person, whoever they are! The gospel explains my lifestyle; it is so much more than a pulpit ministry to me. My life is inseparably joined to you in the fellowship of the good news!”
1 Corinthians 9:16–23 Mirror Bible

“In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there. Simon and his companions searched for Him; they found Him, and said to Him, ‘Everyone is looking for You.’ He said to them, ‘Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.’ And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons.”
Mark 1:35–39 NASB

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