

The Problem with Social Chameleons
1 Corinthian 9:16-23
February 4, 2018

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Isaiah 40: 21-31

- ²¹ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
- ²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
- ²³ who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
- ²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
- ²⁵ To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
- ²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.
- ²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the Lord,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?
- ²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,

the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
³¹ but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

Pre-1 Corinthians Comments

In our New Testament lectionary passage, the apostle Paul is in the middle of an extended argument talking about how Christians give up our power and authority in society in order to serve other people. He starts by talking about he stopped eating meat sacrificed to idols because it was a stumbling block to other Christians, even though he was convinced that it didn't bother God at all. Then he launches into a self-defense. People are claiming that he only preaches so that he can earn a living.

This passage begins with his explaining that he loves and needs to preach the Gospel, and that he has every right to be paid for doing so--but he has given up that right. He then moves into what else he has given up, to help others experience the kind of life that God wants for them. Let's listen to this passage now: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23.

Primary Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 (NIRV)

¹⁶ If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel *free of charge*, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

¹⁹ For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. ²⁰ 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 I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Sermon

Anyone else graduate from the Kellogg business school or Northwestern University? Even if you didn't I know lots of you here went to great schools with great placement offices. Did you learn what I did? Convince the employer to give you an offer, and then figure out if you want the job. Don't lie, but DO tell the interviewer more or less what they want to hear. Basically, be a social chameleon. Put on the identity you think each company is looking for, and boom! Drop the mic and pick up the offer. Sound familiar?

You can't imagine how happy I was when I went to seminary a few years later and found a theological justification for this approach to interviewing: As our

passage says, “Become a Jew to the Jews.” I knew it meant, be a social chameleon and get that call!

My first interview was for a call in a state I didn’t like, for a type of ministry I didn’t like, at a size of church I didn’t like. But....I went full on social chameleon. Become a Jew to the Jews and all that. The chair called me the next day, and her enthusiasm about our interview compelled me to admit to myself, and to her, that I wasn’t a good fit.

After that I left behind my b-school approach to interviewing—thank goodness, because a more faithful perspective brought me here! Along the way I also realized that I was completely misunderstanding the whole “become as a Jew to the Jews” part of our passage. Paul isn’t saying “Be a social chameleon! Fool people into thinking you’re someone you’re not so that you can get whatever you want!”

Paul isn’t really talking about social chameleonosity in this passage at all! Remember he’s anchoring this whole thing in what power and authority he has, and what power and authority he is choosing to give up. As I said, he begins the argument talking about food sacrificed to idols, of all things. Paul doesn’t want to be a stumbling block to people who worried about such things, so he freely decides to stop eating this meat. Then he tells them he’s voluntarily giving up the right to be paid for his preaching. Gutsy guy, that Paul!

Then he says he’s giving up other parts of his power and authority to make connections, even though he doesn’t have to. To the Jews he becomes as a Jew, and to the Gentiles he becomes as a Gentile. Paul keeps giving up his rights and his power, by his own choice.

Now I do admit all of this sounds so two-thousand years ago. Meat sacrificed to idols, laws affecting Jews and Gentiles. What does any of this have to do with 2018? More than you might think.

Mark Wahlberg, Michelle Williams, and Kevin Spacey were slated to star in the movie “All the Money in the World.” Any of you seen it? Well, you didn’t see Kevin Spacey in it. After being accused of sexual assault, he was removed from the cast at the last minute.

They had to reshoot scenes. Michelle Williams offered to reshoot her scenes for \$1000. Mark Wahlberg exercised his power, and offer to reshoot his scenes for \$1.5 million. A social media firestorm soon arose, mostly among the women who have been heroically fighting for equal pay in Hollywood. Wahlberg decided not to hold onto his power, but to give it up, tweeting that he’d donate his fee to the Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund. In doing so, Wahlberg publicly joined the women’s pay-equity crusade.

It’s not food sacrificed to Idols. No mention of Jews or Gentiles. But it is a modern day example of someone choosing to give up his power and authority, and that reminds me a bit of what Paul is talking about. Of course, Paul didn’t have to be shamed into giving up his power by a social media campaign, but for whatever reason, Wahlberg did eventually freely choose to give up his privilege.

So that’s Paul and Mark Wahlberg. What about us? How will we choose to give up some of our own power and authority to help others experience the life that God dreams for them?

It's a question I need to work on. After all, I did not survey what all of the pastors in the presbytery make to ensure that there is pay equity between genders here before accepting my terms of call. And I am not nearly as gutsy as Paul so I'm not preaching here for free.

So what authority am I going to give up to serve others? What power might you give up? I'm just getting to know you; I don't really know enough about your lives to make any specific suggestions for you. But maybe some of the things I'm thinking about for me will help you think of something that you might do in response to this passage.

- I'm worried about the bubble of privilege that will surround me here, so I'm thinking about how I might intentionally seek out relationships with people who are different from me, with less privilege--people of color, people struggling economically, immigrants—and how I might learn from and support them.
- My schedule will be pretty demanding here, so I'm thinking about how I might need to be conscientious about giving up some of my “me” time, so I can invest in my new neighbors, especially any that are going through tough times
- I'm starting off anew here so I'm considering how I can restructure my financial commitments so that I can give more generously to needs that help others experience the life Jesus wants for them.

Again, I'm just wrestling with these now—I haven't made any decisions yet—so don't ask me next week how much progress I've made on all three. Well, if you do, you can expect me to ask me what you're doing to make progress in your life too. I hope we'll all wrestle together about what it means to choose

to give up our power and authority in order to prioritize others...because when we do, we're not just following Paul and Wahlberg. We're following Jesus.

After all, Jesus enjoyed all of the glory of heaven but he chose from the beginning of time to give it all up to become human. And he became a peasant carpenter—not Caesar or the Palestinian version of Oprah. And he didn't then social climb his way to a more luxurious life. Instead he chose to hang out with the outcasts. When his care for them threatened the powers that be, his plan didn't change. He let his body be broken, and let his blood be shed.

He did all this, to connect with us. Choosing to give up his power, to give us abundant life. Choosing to give up his authority, to give us eternal life. Choosing to put us first, to connect with us.

When we rely on that connection with us—by the power of his Holy Spirit—when we choose to give up our power and authority in order to help others connect with him, we connect even more with him too.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.