



This Week

OUR MISSION

As God's disciples, we the men, women and children of Apostles are united in the preaching, teaching and sharing of God's Word in its truth and purity.

By God's grace, we will nurture believers and joyfully spread the Word of God in our community and throughout the world, all to His glory.

This Week's Sermon: 1 Cor. 9:16-23

Sacrifice Self for the Gospel

Pastor Jay Bickelhaupt

Five days from now the Olympic flame will be taken to Torino, Italy, to begin the 2006 Winter Olympics. During the opening ceremony there is much pageantry as the athletes, dressed in their country's colors, parade before the attendees and the millions of people watching on television. I personally am excited to watch the athletes ski the steep slopes, rocket down through the course in a bobsled, and speed skate to a gold medal. The events are awesome to watch but what is even more awe-inspiring to me is the intense training that each athlete undergoes which the audience never sees. Athletes train for years simply to skate or ski for a few seconds. For several years athletes sacrifice friends and family for time to train. They trade comfortable lifestyles and easy living for bruises and sore muscles. They even sacrifice eating pizza in order to have lean physiques and in-shape bodies. Many sacrifices are made in the hopes to obtain the gold!

The competitions of the Winter Olympics begin this coming Friday but the competition in which you and I are involved began a long time ago. If you do not know it already, Christians are athletes also. We may not be physical specimens striving for the gold but we are described as spiritual athletes striving to win souls for Christ! The world is our audience as we live our lives before people dressed in the uniform of Christ's righteousness. As spiritual athletes filled with Jesus' love we will be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel. The words that we focus our attention on were written by the inspired writer Paul, a man who was familiar with sacrifice. He tells us through his letters that he knew what it was like to have nothing. He sacrificed wealth for poverty. Paul knew what it was like to be naked, to go starving, and to have all physical comforts removed from him. Even his friends left him. Yet, these sacrifices did not stop him from competition but emboldened him to preach the Good News of forgiveness and life. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross compelled the apostle Paul; it compels us

as individuals and as a congregation to make sacrifices in order to share the Good News of salvation. May the Holy Spirit instill in your heart and mine the willingness to make sacrifices in order to save souls for the Lord.

Compelled to preach

It is safe to say that the athletes who are going to Torino have a strong desire to be in the Olympic Games. If they did not have the desire to compete

We may not be striving for the gold but we are spiritual athletes striving to win souls for Christ!

1 Cor. 9:16-23

Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those 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), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. 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.

they would not be there. It is also safe to say that the apostle Paul did not want to be a preacher of the Gospel message. Actually Paul, before the Holy Spirit converted him, was trying very diligently to stomp out the Gospel message and wipe out the Christian church. Paul had no desire to be a Gospel preacher but God's

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will always trump man's will. Paul was chosen to be God's instrument to take the Savior's message to foreign nations and gentile peoples. Paul did not have an option but was compelled to preach and teach. In verse 16 he says, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." Paul was not filling a voluntary roll but was fulfilling his obligation to be a good manager by freely distributing the message of salvation. He did not have a choice but to preach.

The church at Corinth was obligated to compensate Paul, as a preacher of the Gospel, for his service. However, Paul refused! It would be as if you went to your boss at work and said, "No, do not pay for me for the many hours that I worked, thank you! I have no choice but to work for you." It doesn't make sense to our human reasoning until you understand that Paul made a sacrifice so that no obstacle would be placed before the Good News of Jesus. The apostle's reward was not found amongst gold, silver, or any earthly possession. Paul's reward was satisfaction, which came from knowing the Gospel could be given away free of charge! He was willing to sacrifice the finer things of life. He was willing to sacrifice even the pay he deserved to receive, all for the sake of the Gospel.

How many would say, "Paul is a better man than I"? Self-sacrificing attitudes are very rare in our society and

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many times they are very rare in our own hearts and minds. Self-centeredness is prevalent in our thinking and selfishness is evident in every one of us. Each time that we knowingly sin we in essence tell God, "Lord this is what I want even though it is against your will." Think about arguments that you may have had with your spouse. How many times have we argued because we were too stubborn to compromise? Self gets focused on so much. "What do I want? What is in it for me?"

As Christians we need to repent of our selfishness, take our eyes off ourselves and ask, "What does God want? What can I do for others?" These are the questions that the apostle asked himself constantly. Paul even goes so far to say that he became a slave to everyone. Paul was a free man. He was a Roman citizen. Yet, he humbled himself to the point of forsaking his rights in order to serve others. Why? What would drive a person to want to be a slave? He simply says, "To win as many as possible." Paul vigorously shared the Gospel in order to win souls for his Savior! This is not a self-centered attitude but instead a Christ-centered one.

Compelled to Save

But how often in our lives do we portray any attitude but a humble one? Our sinful nature sneers at words like submission, humility, or slavery. We are no one's slave! Pride tells us to pick up our heads and be proud of whom we are. Yet, God's Word teaches us to live humble lives of service to him and others. These verses are beautiful reminders of what our purpose in life is as a Christian. We are here on Earth to share the message of Jesus with anyone we possibly can. As a congregation our number one priority is to serve men, women, and children with the means of Grace! This should be very obvious yet many times we may get caught up in the comings and goings of ministry and forget our sole mission. We as a congregation have not been established for the primary purpose of growing in numbers. Our primary purpose is not to build the biggest school that we possible can. We are not established to become the next best country club. Instead you and I have been brought together through the Good News of Jesus to share that same Gospel message with each other and our community. I have the obligation as a public minister of the Word, called by you, to open up my mouth at every opportunity I have, becoming your servant and the servant of Billings. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel! You are ministers of God as well. You have not been called into the public ministry but are a part of the royal priesthood! We often talk about seeing the opportunities to spread the news but how many times do we fail to seize the opportunity? Instead of sharing heaven we allow people to remain in the confines of hell.

When an athlete wins a gold medal they usually do not zip it up in their jacket in order to hide it. No! They wear it proudly for the entire world to see. Do not shut your faith up in your heart but let it be seen. Let the love that you have for Christ be evident as you allow it to spill forth in the lives of others.

Paul mentions many other examples. He became like Jew to win a Jew. He became like those under the law to win those under the law. He became weak in order to win the weak. Paul sacrificed his Christian freedom, and the traditions and customs that he was raised with, in order to share Jesus with the world in which he lived.

I pray that we have this same self-sacrificing attitude. As individuals we need to be prepared to face awkward moments with friends when the subject of religion is brought up. We need to be prepared to swallow our pride. We need to be willing to refrain from something so as not to injure a weak conscience. Awkward moments, pride, and sacrifices are small temporal prices to pay to win a soul for eternity.

This congregation is so very fortunate to have the treas-

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ure of the Gospel still intact. We cling to and protect the Gospel, having no choice but to share it with the world around us. As individual members, are you willing to make sacrifices for your Lord? Are you willing to give up hours of your time to study God's Word so you are prepared to share it? Are you willing to spend hours making plans for ministry and then giving up time to implement those plans? Are you willing to be generous with the gifts that the Lord has given to you so that min-

If we ever have any question about making a sacrifice for God we need only to remember the sacrifice he made for us.

istry can be accomplished? If we ever have any question about making a sacrifice for God we need only to remember the sacrifice he made for us. Not only did he die on the cross but he sacrificed the comforts of eternal paradise to become a human being. We do not make perfect sacrifices. That is why we need Jesus to be our perfect sacrifice. The sin of selfishness that damns us to hell is forgiven as Jesus showed himself to be selfless by taking time and healing people of their diseases and driving out demons. The reluctance that

we have as individuals or even as a congregation is forgiven by Christ's actions. As Jesus tells his disciples, "Let's go somewhere else—to nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

Many often wonder what the purpose of life is. There is no need for you and me to wonder. We are compelled to share the Good News and we are compelled to save souls for the Lord. Think about the power that each of us has. We all possess salvation and have the wonderful privilege of sharing it with souls who are headed into eternal hell-fires. That is not a task that is frightening but rather it is an opportunity that is awesome.

Who are we to have been called to share the life-giving message? We are God's people who not only share the faith but the also the blessings of heaven. May we always, as individual souls and as a congregation on fire for the Lord, remember the purpose that has been given to us. May we be willing to make sacrifices in our lives to share Jesus and be excited to save souls for him. What an honor and privilege we have. Amen.

Jay Bickelhaupt is serving as pastor at Apostles Evangelical Lutheran Church in Billings, Montana. For contact information, please visit us at www.apostlesmt.net.

ID, Please!

Keys. Cell phone. The mental list of items you need to buy at the store. The name of someone you just met. These are things we're used to forgetting. But can you imagine the confusion of forgetting who you are, waking up one sunny afternoon in a hospital bed with amnesia and not knowing any of the strange, smiling faces surrounding you? Who do you trust to tell you what your name is? Where do you live? What's your line of work? Are you married to one of these people?

If you're thinking this only happens in a Robert Ludlum novel or a Jerry Bruckheimer film, think more locally, more personally. Because we all at some time forget who we are, or at least seriously wonder about our identity. Teenagers want to be adults but sometimes act like kids, and too easily find their identity in what others think of them. Singles mistakenly consider themselves inferior for not having a mate. Parents who juggle jobs and kids and church and household question how many identities they really have and which is most important. People in mid-life do serious soul-searching looking for themselves. Those retiring or retired wonder what they have accomplished, how they'll fit in, where they're going. Graduates aren't sure whether they'll get a job. The confusion of these identity problems can produce anxiety, guilt, fear or loneliness. There is, however, a reliable source of information to tell us exactly who we are, no matter where in life we might be.

The Bible says, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? ... We are the temple of the living God" (1 Corinthians 3:16, 2 Corinthians 6:16). You and I and all believers are saints (by the way, you

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don't have to die and pass canonization to become one). We are living stones in God's temple, which is the universal church extending from earth to heaven, including our baptized babies, our glorified loved ones who have died in the faith, our Christian loved ones far away, Abraham, Peter, believers from other denominations, and all believers everywhere. We are a communion of saints built on and connected by Christ, our cornerstone.

Cornerstones are important. They have dates etched in them. They are laid so that they attract attention. They are celebrated with deep meaning and rich history. God has connected you to Christ, your cornerstone, and has cemented you in as part of his temple where he lives. So he'll never leave you or forsake you. He'll never pull you out and leave a big hole in the wall. He'll always give you strength, support and stability. He'll keep you secure because of Christ your cornerstone. You are part of a building plan designed by God, the master architect, who places every stone in his temple just where he wants it to be. Some on top. Some underneath. Some by the side. All

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connected to the cornerstone, who is Christ, and to each other by faith.

A while back I traveled out of the country and when proceeding through customs and security I wanted to keep my ID in a handy place so that I wouldn't have to dig for it while others waited in line behind me. But I didn't want it too handy so that it would be lost in the hustle and bustle of carrying bags and finding terminals. I wanted it safely kept yet conveniently accessible. Just like your proof of identity as a saint of God. That ID is safely kept in the loving promises of God so that it can not be misplaced, lost, or stolen. Yet is is also conveniently accessible as you simply trust in Jesus and live your faith. So never forget who you really are. And never fail to live like the saint God has made you to be.

Apostles Evangelical Lutheran Church
Billings, Montana

Worship Services Sunday at 10:30 a.m. and Monday at 6:30 p.m.

Sunday School and Adult Bible Classes Sunday at 9:15 a.m.

Men's Bible Study Monday morning at 6:30 a.m.

Women's Study Tuesday morning at 10:00 a.m.

Contact the pastor at (406) 656-7141 about the opportunities to join a **Bible Information Class**.

More information and resources are available on our website at www.apostlesmt.net or by contacting the church office at (406) 656-7141.

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