

# BECOMING ALL THINGS

*SERIES: BECOME LIKE THEM TO LOVE THEM*

**By Paul Taylor**

I have three very young children, two of whom are girls, and I've probably seen the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid* about a hundred times in the past few months. It's about a young mermaid, Ariel, who falls desperately in love with a man named Eric, who is a prince. But Ariel realizes that in order to love him, she must become like him. The plot of the movie tracks her misguided attempts to enter his world so that they can fall in love. And although she realizes how difficult it is to enter his world, she knows that she must. She understands that their relationship isn't going to go anywhere unless she can trade her fin for legs.

As we look around our world, I think we need to learn to do that as well. To love all people, we need to learn how to become all things. When I look around at people, I realize pretty quickly that I have a fin and they all have legs. This is true even with the person who is closest to me, my wife Rachel. When we were dating, we were constantly surprised at how similar we were to each other. But as soon as we got married, at every turn we were surprised by new ways that we were different from each other. Loving someone who is different from you is hard. But if we are going to love people outside the community of faith and invite them to experience the life-changing love of Christ, we need to learn to love people who are different from us.

And to love them we must become like them. We must become all things. In this message we'll be looking at Paul's example in 1 Corinthians 9 and trying to understand what it means to become all things to all people. Why do we do that, how do we do that, and what does it look like? In the next message we'll look at the example of Christ in Philippians 2 and observe that he followed this principle by becoming nothing. How do we become nothing? What do we give up? What do we keep?

Our text is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. This passage has three parts that we're going to walk through. First, Paul explains the **principle** that he has used in outreach. Next, he describes what that has looked like in **practice**. Finally, he gives us his **purpose** behind 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.**

Let's begin by looking at the context of these words. We're looking at this passage to learn from Paul the ways that he went about reaching out to people in his world. But this passage is part of

Paul's broader instruction to the Corinthians on how to get along with each other. In chapter 8 he talks about the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols and suggests that people give up their right to do so for the sake of their brother who believes this to be wrong. In the beginning of chapter 9 he defends his rights as an apostle before pointing out that he gave up his rights in order to love them. His point throughout all of this is to teach the people at Corinth how to love each other. So right away, we learn something important. What we're talking about here doesn't just have to do with outreach. What we're talking about is how to love people. Love is love is love. It doesn't matter whether they are sitting in the pew next to you, sitting with you at your dinner table, lying in bed with you at night, living across the street from you, or living halfway across the world. Paul is teaching us how to love other people, no matter who they are or where they are.

He begins by stating the general principle that he's promoting.

### **Become like them to love them**

Verse 19: "Though I am free...I make myself a slave...." Paul submits himself to others in order to reach them. He puts himself underneath them. This is about as shocking as anything Paul could have said. In a culture where people were compelled in the face of financial ruin to sell themselves into slavery as an absolute last resort, Paul says that he willingly enslaved himself to others. He says that he was willing to give up his rights in order to reach out to people. He was willing to become like them to love them. He was willing to become a slave.

This is amazing! It's the exact opposite of the way we typically act. Normally, we do everything we can to avoid feeling inferior to someone else. Listen to the way people talk. Listen to people in meetings. Listen to husbands talk to their wives. Listen to parents talk to their kids. Listen to friends joking around. We spend a lot of time and energy trying to avoid the feeling that someone else is better than we are. I see it in the way I interact all the time. I'll say something about myself in a group situation and think, "Why did I say that?" Then I'll realize I wanted to fight off a feeling of inferiority. We hate to feel inferior.

But Paul is saying here that he willingly enslaves himself, puts himself underneath someone else, in order to win them. This word translated "win" is a curious word. The standard Greek lexicon defines it this way: "To acquire by investment or effort." It's frequently used in economic contexts. It's also used in reference to people. But what does it mean to acquire a person by investment or effort? When it's used in that sense in the New Testament, it doesn't just mean winning souls or converting people or convincing skeptics. It always includes the idea of a close relationship or connection. Jesus uses it when he talks about confronting your brother who is engaged in sin, with the hope that you might "win your brother" (Matthew 18:15), that the relationship might be restored and your brother be led to repentance. Paul uses it when he says he casts aside what seems valuable in the hope that he might "win Christ" (Philippians 3:8). He's not trying to convert Christ. He's talking about a deep personal connection with him. Paul adapts himself to others so that he can lead others to Christ through the context of his relationship with them. It's not arms-length evangelism. He's talking about relationship, about connection, about love.

So that's the principle: become all things to love all people. Become like them to love them. But before we start talking about the specifics of how Paul put this into practice, I want you to think about what this looks like for you. Who are the people you are trying to love? What does it look like to adapt yourself to them? Sometimes people do this in dramatic ways. I have friends who intentionally lived in a poor section of East Palo Alto after graduating from Stanford in order to reach out to people. We know of people traveling halfway across the world to India to be like people by being with them, by entering their physical world, in order to love them. Other times this is done in more subtle ways. When I worked at Oracle, I found out there was a group of guys who would have a drink at a restaurant nearby every Thursday night before going home. I always thought it would be great to join them, although I never actually did. I was more interested in getting home quickly. But that would have been becoming like them to love them. Jordan, our high school pastor, helps to coach a basketball team at Palo Alto High School so that he can love students by entering their world. What does this look like for you? Could God be calling you to respond in a dramatic way? Maybe he's asking you to respond in a more subtle way: looking for common ground that you already share with someone else and loving them in that way. What does it look like for you?

As we continue in the passage, we see Paul describing what this meant for him in practice.

### **Put people before ideas**

Verse 19 outlined the principle, and in verses 20-22 we get the practice. This section follows a strong pattern. Paul says that he became like different kinds of people to win them. To the Jews he became a Jew to win Jews. To the lawful he became lawful to win the lawful. To the lawless he became lawless to win the lawless. To the weak he became weak to win the weak. (Paul doesn't mean physically weak people here; he has used that term throughout 1 Corinthians to refer to people who weren't confident of their freedom in Christ. These were the people still eating kosher even though they didn't have to.) He became like them in order to love them.

What amazes me about this list is that these aren't trivial issues. It's not as if he wore a tie to reach executives, or that he bleached his hair to reach Malibu surfers, or that he worked at Google to reach Silicon Valley techno-geeks. Those would be trivial, meaningless adaptations. For sure, he would have done things like those and probably did, but what he is saying here is much more significant. The categories he describes are major theological issues: living like a Jew, living under the Law, living apart from the Law, being weak. In Paul's other writings, he spends a lot of time, maybe even most of his time, trying to straighten his readers out on these issues. Are we supposed to live like Jews? Are we still under the Law? Are we completely free from any law? How do we interact with more conservative brothers? These are extremely important issues to Paul that he wants to make sure followers of Christ understand.

So what is he doing here? Doesn't he know that if he eats kosher around other people, they are going to think that they are supposed to eat kosher? Doesn't he know that if he acts as if he doesn't have a law around other people, they will think it's okay to act as if you don't have a law? Yes! Of course he knows this. But he is willing to create misconceptions for people—

major, thorny, divisive, theological misconceptions—in order to win them. Can you believe that? Would you do that? He's willing to create misconceptions for people in order to love them. Why? Because love is more important. He wants to love people. And the only way to love people is to become like them, even if it means being misunderstood. For Paul, people are more important than ideas. He's willing to risk people's believing faulty ideas in order to love them. We can learn a lot from Paul in this area. Here at PBC we love ideas. We think ideas are important. And they are extremely important. But I wonder if sometimes we put ideas above people. That can cause us to hurt people deeply.

In my house, we have a phrase that I use sometimes when two of my kids are fighting over the same toy. If they can't agree on how to play with a toy together, I take the toy away and tell them that we have to remove the toy because people are more important than things, and if things are causing us to hurt people, then we need to take away the things. Paul is promoting a similar practice. If ideas are getting in the way of loving people, then I'll put the ideas aside for the moment so I can love the people.

Does this seem crazy to you? It should. This has enormous implications. How do you love someone whom you think is engaging in behavior that isn't God-honoring? Do you start by making it clear that their behavior is wrong? Or do you just love them first, taking the risk that they might interpret your love as endorsing their behavior? I think Paul's example says we have to lead off with love. Jesus' life certainly modeled the same principle. His critics accused him of endorsing promiscuity and prostitution, idolatry and greed, just because he loved people whose lives were characterized by these things. If I love someone who is living with his girlfriend, I

might accidentally lead him to believe that it's okay to live with his girlfriend. If I love someone who is gay, I might accidentally lead him to believe that God approves of homosexual activity. If I love someone who hates God, he might think it's okay to hate God. So my love might create misconceptions for people. They might misunderstand. But they'll be loved.

Don't you realize that as we interact with the world, we are bound to create misconceptions for people? It's impossible for us to be perfectly understood. Nobody will know us or understand us completely through our casual interactions with them. Understanding takes time. I still routinely misunderstand my wife and I know her better than anyone in the world. But we can have some control over the way that people misunderstand us. There's a new book out called *unChristian* (1) that spells out some of the big misperceptions that people outside Christianity have about Christians. None of them are that we love too much. In fact, the book argues that people outside the church mainly think that Christians don't act like Christ. They judge us according to our own standards. The six major perceptions that people have about Christians are that they are hypocritical, overly focused on evangelism, anti-homosexual, sheltered, overly political, and judgmental. Almost all of these have to do with our lack of love. And I know enough Christians to know that sometimes these are accurate perceptions. But a lot of the time these are misperceptions. A lot of the time we are perceived this way because of the value we place on ideas. But they aren't really true. We are being misunderstood. But if we're going to be misunderstood, let's be misunderstood on the side of love. Let's put people before ideas. Let's follow Paul's model of loving them first and worry about straightening out their false ideas and wrong behaviors later.



In the middle of the *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel wants desperately to become a human so she can be with her love, Eric. But the people around her try to talk her out of it. Her tutor Sebastian sings a memorable song called *Under the Sea* in an effort to convince her that life in the water is much better than life on land. He tries to tell her that there is no reason she should want to go onto land in order to be with Eric. One of the lines of song reads:

“Darling it’s better  
Down where it’s wetter  
Take it from me” (2)

As we start to enter the lives of unbelievers around us, it may cause some concern from other Christians. Sometimes the Christian community has a centrifugal force. Sometimes we act more like a swirling vortex than a launching pad. Sometimes people within our community criticize us and fight against us as we try to become like others so that we can love them. They will try to talk us out of becoming like others as a way of loving them because of exactly the risks we see Paul taking: It’s dangerous. People might misunderstand you. They might think their lives are okay. They might think God loves them even though they are greedy, legalistic, addicted, gay, abusive, or whatever.

But this principle of loving people first takes seriously what we believe about the Christian life: that change is impossible apart from a deep knowledge of the love of God. Paul says that the kindness of God leads to repentance (Romans 2:4). Love comes first. Real change can happen only within the loving community of faith. Why do we expect people who don’t know God to

live healthy lives? Why do we expect young Christians to be mature? Why do we expect so much from people who aren't even sure that God loves them? It can be hard enough to change when you know the love of God the Father, you are confident of his forgiveness through Christ, and you have the Holy Spirit in your life. How can we possibly expect people without those things to change?

My own walk with God really began in earnest through my church's high school ministry. I had just moved to a new city and desperately wanted someone to love me and help me to feel okay about myself. And that's what my high school pastor did. I felt like someone who was worth something when I was around him. I felt like someone who mattered. I felt like someone God cared about and forgave and welcomed into his kingdom. So I pursued God, because I felt his love. I have sometimes looked back on that ministry and have been critical of its under-emphasis on ideas and the Bible. But I was loved, so I started a walk with God that led me to the Bible and to right ideas when I was ready. God uses different things to reach different people according to where they are. If we want to reach people, we can't expect them to already value the Bible or believe in God or want to come to church. We need to find out where they are and adapt ourselves to them in order to love them.

We've seen the general principle that Paul is talking about: he adapts himself to others in order to love them. And we've seen how he has worked this out in practice: he risked significant theological misperceptions for the sake of loving people. But at the end he gives us the purpose behind his actions.

## **Participate in the gospel**

Throughout the passage, he's given us a consistent reason for his actions: he wants to win people. But here at the end of our passage, there is a curious shift. All through this passage, Paul has been saying that he became something in order to win people, in order that something might happen for someone else. But at the very end, he says that he does all these things in order that *he* might become something. Now we find that the grand purpose behind his actions is that something might happen for him. Verse 23: "I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings." The phrase is literally "that I might become a fellow participant in the gospel." He uses the same word for becoming that he has been using throughout the passage. This is a major revelation. This whole business of becoming like others to love them isn't just a missions strategy. It isn't just a good way to reach people. It isn't just a method to learn. It is the very nature of the gospel. Paul does this not just because he wants to win people, but because he wants to participate in the gospel. And he's calling us to do the same: participate in the gospel.

The gospel is the story of a God who condescended himself to human status in order to reach humankind. It's the story of becoming like someone in order to love them. And what Paul is saying here is that if we are serious about living the gospel, then we will adapt ourselves to others in order to love them. Loving others is at the very core of the gospel. And this is how you go about loving others: you become like them.

If we really catch on to the idea that loving people like this is the way that we become participants in the gospel story, it changes everything. It's no longer about what we can offer God. It's no longer about guilt motivation and high-pressure evangelism tactics and feelings of failure when people don't "pray the prayer." Believe me, I've been there. My experience in college was with evangelism that made me feel guilty, pressured, and constantly like a failure. So you can imagine, if I felt like that, how the people I was "reaching out" to must have felt: even worse!

But participating in the gospel story is about coming alongside of God and loving the way that he loved. It's about being changed in the process. John says that we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). God's love is the motivation for our loving others, but it's also the model. We love others in the same way that God first loved us. And God first loved us by adapting himself to us. So we love others by adapting ourselves to them. And Paul says that although it starts with our becoming something for the sake of someone else, it ends with our becoming changed ourselves. It starts with our bringing the gospel to others, but it ends with our understanding the gospel ourselves. It's a cycle. Our love for others helps us to understand God's love for us, which helps us to love others more authentically, which helps us to understand God's love for us even more deeply, which helps us to love others, and so on. The journey that we're on as followers of Christ is one of becoming better lovers. As we adapt ourselves to others, we are more able to love. And that love will spill out in our lives. As I adapt myself to my spouse to love her better, I'll be more able to adapt myself to my neighbor to love him better and more able to adapt myself to a Dalit living in India with HIV to love him better. We participate in the gospel and become better lovers.

## Conclusion

At the end of *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is finally able to love Eric because her father, the king of the seas, changes her into a human. He loves her so much that he realizes he has to enable her to pursue her own love. And when he does this, both Ariel and Eric return to him at the end of the movie to thank him and acknowledge their deep love for him. My prayer for us is that we would ask our Father to help us change and adapt ourselves to others so that we can come back to him with others who have discovered his love.

So what does it mean for us to become all things? In this message we've seen Paul spell out his principle of adapting himself to others in order to love them. We've seen that as he practiced that, he was willing to risk a lot in order to love people. He put people before ideas, often risking significant theological misconceptions because he believed in connecting with people in relationship first. And we've been surprised by the revelation that when we adapt ourselves to bring the gospel to others, we ourselves are changed by its power.

## Notes

1. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters*, © 2007, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI.

2. Howard Ashman, lyrics of *Under the Sea*, © 1988, Wonderland Music Co., Inc.  
(BMI)/Walt Disney Music Company (ASCAP).

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Catalog No. 5260

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

First Message

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November 11, 2007

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