

Compelled to Preach

“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!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

For nearly thirty years, the apostle Paul proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to kings and commoners, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, free and slave, even to Greece’s finest philosophers—some of whom called him a σπερμαλόγος, a “seed picker.”

During that time, Paul made three extensive missionary journeys and by some estimates traveled more than 25,000 miles. Along the way, he faced fierce opposition and endured many hardships: hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, sleeplessness, betrayal, beatings, stoning, persecution—and all of this while struggling with that mysterious “*thorn in the flesh*” (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Surely, at our busiest, we’ve all still marveled at Paul’s tireless commitment to preaching the gospel. *“For I am compelled to preach,”* he said. Compelled. The Greek word is ἀνάγκη and means “necessity.” Literally translated, Paul said, “a necessity is laid on me.” But what was that necessity? What compelled Paul to travel so far and to endure such hardships in order to preach the gospel of Christ and to the point of exclaiming: *“Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”*? The answer, I believe, is fourfold.

First, Paul was compelled by his divine call, that is, by the fact that God had chosen and privileged him to serve as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Remember, ministry was not Paul’s chosen profession. Before his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul was a prosecutor and persecutor, not a preacher. That Paul became an apostle of Christ was by God’s design, not his—a fact that Paul stated in nine of his thirteen epistles, including 1 Corinthians, *“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:1).

Second, the “necessity” of which Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 9:16 was not an outer coercion, but an inner conviction worked by the Spirit of God—a burning, unquenchable desire to preach Christ even should there be no one to hear. Each of us, fellow ministers of Christ, have felt that same inner necessity. It’s what led us to the seminary. It’s what compels us to go on ministering and proclaiming Christ despite our personal or congregational circumstances— whether successes or failures, good times or bad, packed pews or meager attendance.

In the first devotion, I raised the question, “Why did I want to be a minister?” But despite frustrations and occasional doubts, as ministers of Jesus Christ we all know the answer. Rightly understood, the answer is that we had no other choice, meaning that for us there was only one choice because of the deep conviction worked in us by God’s Spirit. In this regard, the compelling need we feel to proclaim God’s truth is no different from Paul’s and no different from Martin Luther’s, who said at the Diet of Worms, “Here I stand. I can do none other. God help me! Amen.”

Charles Spurgeon wrote: "A man who truly has within him the inspiration of the Holy Spirit calling him to preach cannot help it. He must preach. Like fire within the bones, so will that influence be until it blazes forth. Friends may restrain him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, yet the man is resolute. He must preach if he has the call from heaven." ¹

Third, Paul was compelled by the urgency of his calling. Preaching the gospel of Christ was a necessity for Paul because there is no other way for lost sinners to be saved. This is what led the apostle to write in the same ninth chapter of 1 Corinthians, *"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible"* and again, *"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"* (1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-23).

Are there more lucrative callings than being a minister of Christ? Absolutely. But there is no more important calling or rewarding calling, for God has given each of us the privilege of preaching His gospel—the gospel, as Paul reminded the Romans, that *"is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes"* (Romans 1:16). How privileged we are indeed! How compelled we should be!

Finally, Paul was compelled to preach the gospel because of the blessings that very same gospel brought to him. It is a deep, personal appreciation of what Jesus Christ has done for each of us that above all else compels us to preach Christ to others. *"For Christ's love compels us,"* Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14.

And the apostle's humble gratitude is unmistakable in his words to Timothy: *"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst"* (1 Timothy 1:12-15).

Compelled to preach. Yes, we are—by God's call, conviction, urgency, and grace. It's what we always wanted to do, because He always wanted us to do it.