

HINDERING OR FURTHERING THE GOSPEL

I Corinthians 9:12-23

Had we been in Corinth nineteen centuries ago, we likely would have passed the bazaars and the market places and the factories where the famed Corinthian brass was made and have gone down into the ghetto of the city where the Jews lived. There in that quarter we would have come to the house of Aquila and Priscilla. They were Jews who came from Pontus, a rich province lying along the Black Sea. They had lived for a time in Rome but had left the city at the time of the decree of the Emperor Claudius. He had expelled all Jews from Rome, although in a somewhat more merciful way than Hitler and his followers who tried to accomplish the same end before World War II. From Rome they went to Corinth. Aquila was a tentmaker, and Paul, being of the same trade, took up his abode in their house. Paul assisted Aquila and Priscilla as they worked with the heavy folds of cloth out of which the black tents were made. Perhaps Priscilla now and then threaded the needle for Paul, whose sight was by no means keen. When at length they had finished their task for the day, Paul arose from his bench and, leaving them, went out to speak to the Jews and Gentiles of the city about Christ the Saviour of men.

Paul worked at his trade of tentmaking there in Corinth in order that he might support himself. His reason for doing so was not because he did not deem it proper to be supported by the church. This was a right which he was careful to state and maintain, that those who preached the gospel should live by the gospel. Paul told the Corinthians that if he had sown unto them spiritual things, it was no great demand of them that he should reap from them material things.

This right, which Paul so carefully declared in the case of Corinth, he waived for the sake of a greater influence in preaching the gospel and because of a peculiar situation which existed in the church at Corinth. By foregoing his rights as an Apostle and submitting to hard toil and privation, he obtained greater results in his service for Christ.

When you are unkindly and unjustly criticized, it may help you to remember what happened to so great a servant of Christ as Paul. He had numerous enemies there in Corinth. They intimated that he was a bogus apostle. They wanted to know where his letters or credentials were. They ridiculed his person, saying that, although he could write a weighty letter, his personal presence was weak and his speech was contemptible. Paul did not care anything about that. What he did care about was that he should live in such a way that nobody would ever be able to say that his motives in preaching the gospel were unworthy or that he was in the ministry for what he could get out of it. Lest any should use that as a club against him, Paul waived and surrendered his right, so carefully and repeatedly stated, as a minister of the gospel to live by the gospel. That was why he was there toiling with Aquila and Priscilla at the tentmaker's trade. He chose to do that lest he should, although unintentional and innocently, hinder the gospel of Christ.

"Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ." This arresting statement raises the question of personal influence, our obligation as Christians to spread the gospel in every way possible and to exercise great care not to hinder it in any way.

What are some of the ways in which we may hinder the gospel of Christ?

I. Through Lack Of Faith.

At the beginning of His ministry the Lord Jesus Christ went to the town of Nazareth, where He had been reared, and preached in the synagogue. He used Isaiah's beautiful and meaningful text, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them

that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." But His neighbors and townspeople, among whom He was reared, were filled with anger at what He said, drove Him out of the town and tried to cast Him over a precipice and kill Him. Later in His ministry Christ returned to His home town and taught again in the same synagogue. This time He did not encounter the open violence He had at the first visit, but the people could not reconcile His profound and beautiful sayings, and the miracles He had wrought, with the fact that He was one of their own. They said, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses and of Judah and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at Him."

Then follows the striking record of the evangelists, both Mark and Matthew: "And he could do there no mighty work, save that He laid His hands upon a few sick folk and healed them." Where the work of Christ is to be done in our hearts and done in the world, there must be the collaboration of our faith.

The success of the warfare against evil in the world is in part determined by the belief or unbelief of Christian people in the churches. The progress of the gospel is hindered or helped by what you and I do. What power this is that is lodged in you and me, frail creatures of a day, that we should be able to hinder the work of God, that we should be able to make the wheels of the chariot of the gospel drive heavily, that we should be able to divert the waters of the river of the Water of Life!

II. Through Failure To Do.

We can hinder the gospel of Christ by failure to propagate it. Christ said, "He that is not with Me is against Me." In this great warfare there is no neutrality toward the gospel. If you are not helping it, you are hindering it. He who is not endeavoring to further the spreading of the gospel by his labors, prayers and gifts is hindering it. Are you hindering the gospel or helping to spread it?

III. Through What We Do.

There are things which in themselves are not harmful to us. Yet, it is possible that they may hinder someone else in the Christian faith; and, if so, they hinder the gospel. People often speak about their personal liberty. And so did Paul. We have two striking examples of the high and noble way in which Paul handled this question of personal liberty.

1. In the matter of eating meat offered to idols.
The pagan temples were the meat shops of the big cities of that day. After the sacrifices had been made, the meat was sold to the people. A few Christians, who had just come out of idolatry, felt that it was not right for a Christian to buy and eat meat that had just been offered to an idol. Paul said that he did not feel that way. An idol to him was nothing at all except a vain imagination. Paul would just as soon eat meat that had been offered to an idol as any other kind. But, said he, if my exercising that personal liberty should cause any Christian to stumble or to take offense, then I shall not eat any more meat. Paul preferred to go meatless rather than hinder the gospel in the heart of anybody.
2. In the matter of the preacher being supported by the gospel.
Paul said that it was right and proper that the preacher should be supported thus. However, when he found that there were hostile persons there at Corinth who were trying to discredit him and the gospel, and who were ready to say that he preached only because of what he got out of it, he refused to avail himself of that right of support by the church and supported himself by toiling at his trade as a tentmaker, lest he should hinder the gospel. He would not be placed in pecuniary dependence. He simply waived his right to a reward for his labor. He was determined that he would not give the enemies of Christ's gospel an occasion for charging him with using the gospel as a means of personal gain.

Paul had rights as a preacher of the gospel, but he did not make use of them. He was free, but he did not make use of his liberty, except to make himself the servant of everybody in the hope that he might win some to a saving knowledge of Christ. The gain which he was expecting from his ministry was not money, but souls. His efforts in that realm were abundant, but his hopes were modest--the salvation of some. He knew full well the stern realities with which he had to contend. He counted it a great joy to give a life-giving and life-thrilling message without taking any selfish advantage of his own rights. The driving force of Paul's great ministry was the compelling conviction that he was God-sent. For him, preaching was not a profession but a passion. It was a necessity for him to preach. He could not keep from preaching.