

January 25, 2026 Morning Worship Sermon

“As a Serving Flock”

1 Corinthians 9:19–23

by Pastor Chon Himchan

9:19 Though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may gain more.

9:20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to gain Jews. To those under the Law—though I myself am not under the Law—I became as one under the Law, in order to gain those under the Law.

9:21 To those without the Law—though I am not without the law of God but under the law of Christ—I became as one without the Law, in order to gain those without the Law.

9:22 To the weak I became weak, in order to gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that by all means I might save some.

9:23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

In the passage we have just read, the apostle Paul says that although he was free, he made himself a slave. Hidden within these paradoxical words is the very essence of gospel proclamation. This morning, let us learn together what it means to “proclaim the gospel through serving.”

In order to understand this passage, it is necessary to grasp the flow beginning from chapter 8. At that time, the Corinthian church was in confusion over whether it was right or wrong to eat meat that had been offered to idols. This was because most of the meat sold in the marketplace had been offered to idols. Paul’s answer was clear. “An idol is nothing in the world, and there is no God but one.” Standing on this truth, he stated plainly that there was no problem in eating meat offered to idols.

However, Paul did not stop there. What he focused on was the reality that not everyone possessed this knowledge. There were brothers with weak consciences who were struggling with doubts, thinking, “If I eat this meat, will I not be involved with idols?” Paul said, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Suppose someone, with the conviction that idols do not exist, eats the meat boldly. Then a brother with a weak conscience sees that person and thinks, “If he is eating it, it must be all right,” and eats the meat as well. Yet in his heart there remains hesitation. At that moment, he ends up eating it as meat offered to idols. Paul regarded this as a serious problem, because it is not only a sin against a brother, but a sin against Christ.

Therefore Paul made the astonishing declaration: “If food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again.” Rather than insisting on his own correctness or freedom, he gave priority to helping his brothers grow and be built up in Christ.

When we come to chapter 9, Paul goes even further and speaks about himself. As an apostle and as a spiritual leader, he had the right to receive financial support from the Corinthian church. Yet Paul deliberately set aside that right, worked with his own hands, and served them, so that the gospel would not be hindered in any way. Why did he do this? Because the spiritual growth of the brothers was Paul's highest priority.

And then, in verse 19, Paul summarizes with an extremely impactful statement:

9:19 Though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may gain more.

Although he was free from all, he became a slave to all. The word “slave” is shocking. A slave is a person whose human rights and freedom are not recognized, who is treated like a tool and used for labor as the private property of the owner. In other words, a slave has no realm of living for oneself, but exists solely to live for the master. Paul says that he became such a person to all people. What is even more surprising is that, as he says, “I have made myself a slave,” this was not something forced upon him, but something he chose of his own will. He became a free slave, a voluntary slave.

In fact, this concept of a “voluntary slave” has existed since the time of the Old Testament. It is a statute written in Exodus 21:1–6. God commanded the people of Israel that if they made a Hebrew a slave, they must surely set him free in the seventh year. However, there was one exception. At the time of release, if the slave loved his master and desired to remain as a slave, he was permitted to stay.

Think about it. This is the God who delivered His people from slavery in Egypt. Because He does not desire people to live as slaves, He established a law of release. And yet, why did He allow a person to remain as a slave?

It was because of love. The slave loves his master and sincerely desires, of his own will, to serve him. There is no coercion or obligation there. Genuine service—serving freely, from the heart, of one's own accord—and true devotion, in which one gives up everything to serve the master, are bearing fruit within that person. God regarded that heart and that posture as good. Paul was the same. With freedom, gladly and willingly, he gave up everything and offered himself.

Then what was it that drove Paul to live such a life? It was his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul was once a zealous Pharisee who persecuted Christians. He lived by his own righteousness and his own religious pride. But the risen Christ appeared to him. At that moment, Paul's life was turned completely around. He was set free in Christ, made entirely new, and became one who follows Christ and lives in imitation of Christ. Paul writes about this in the letter to the Philippians:

Philippians 2:6–8

2:6 Who, though He was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped,

2:7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant,

being made in the likeness of men.

And being found in appearance as a man,

2:8 He humbled Himself

by becoming obedient to the point of death,

even death on a cross.

To become a slave voluntarily out of love—this was truly embodied by Jesus Himself. What I want us to pay attention to in this passage is the phrase “emptied Himself.” In Greek, this is *kenosis*, meaning “to make empty.” Jesus emptied Himself; that is, here we see Jesus’ self-renunciation, His self-giving. And what is important is that He was not emptied, nor was He made empty, but that He emptied Himself—this was a voluntary self-renunciation.

Jesus was God. And yet, He did not consider His divine nature as something to be clung to, but took the form of a servant, became a slave, and was made like human beings. The Creator becoming a created being—can there be anything more beyond our understanding? To use an illustration, it would be like a potter becoming the clay, or a painter becoming the canvas. Who would desire such a thing? And yet Jesus willingly did this. Why was that? Let us open the Scriptures and look at one more passage.

Mark 10:45

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus clearly states His purpose: “to give His life as a ransom for many.” Jesus says that His own life is “a ransom.” In the original language, this word means a “price paid for release,” a ransom paid to free slaves or captives. In other words, Jesus offered His own life as the ransom in order to set free people who were held captive as slaves.

Then, slaves to what are human beings? The context of Mark chapter 10 teaches us this. We are slaves to the desire “to be served.” We are slaves to self-centeredness. In this chapter, the disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Each of them wanted to be served, to be acknowledged, to be exalted. This is our human nature. We can think only of ourselves.

In order to free these self-centered slaves, Jesus chose a completely opposite way. That is, to give His own life for others. God became human; the Master became a slave; the Giver of life died. Paul encountered this Jesus on the road to Damascus. And he came to understand how deeply he himself had been a slave to self-centeredness. Then Paul was completely set free from being a self-centered slave. And with that freedom, he willingly became a slave of Jesus. At the opening of the letter to the Romans, he introduces himself like this:

Romans 1:1

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.”

It is translated as “servant,” but this word means “slave.” Paul was set free by Jesus, and with that freedom he became a slave of Jesus. He made Jesus his Master and became one who lives only for the purpose of proclaiming the gospel that the Lord Jesus showed him to carry out. That confession and practice are precisely the Word for today.

And just as Jesus became human and became a servant, Paul also became a slave to all people in order to lead as many as possible to salvation. The concrete practice of this is found in verses 20–22. Paul repeats the same structure here: “To ___ I became like ___. In order to gain ___.” He repeats this expression again and again. The method Paul took was the same as Jesus’. It was to “become like” them. Why did he choose this method? Paul says, “In order to gain them, I became like them.” In other words, by becoming like them, opportunities to gain them are created. Put another way, if one does not become like them, gaining them becomes difficult.

Underlying this is a certain understanding of human nature. It is that human beings are extremely reluctant to come out of their own shells. Everyone lives centered on themselves and cannot step out from that center. Therefore, just as Jesus did, Paul denied himself and entered into the other person’s world. He threw himself in for the sake of the gospel. Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” The salvation of people bears fruit through the voluntary sacrifice of someone else.

When I was a university student, my home church held soup kitchens for homeless people. It was a ministry in which we shared the Word of God and served meals. We continued this ministry, but there was a persistent sense of discomfort that I could never shake off. This was because, after the meals, I saw them leaving with indescribably lonely expressions and heavy footsteps. We could not really have heartfelt conversations with them. One day, one of my fellow workers suggested, “Why don’t we eat together with them?” He said that we should sit down, eat together, and talk more seriously. From that point on, we began lining up together in the serving line. I still remember very clearly the moment I joined the line for the first time. The instant I stood there, I felt an intense sense of resistance. The gazes of people passing by pierced me like needles. Overwhelmed by the shameful thought, “They might think I am homeless too,” I nervously glanced around and desperately cried out in my heart, “I am one of those on the other side. I am on the side that helps.”

One day, as I was standing in line as usual with restless eyes, I happened to lock eyes with a friend from my junior high school days who was passing by. The next moment, I did something astonishing. Reflexively, I ran away from that place. I learned how difficult it is “to become the same.” How difficult it is to abandon one’s pride, to abandon one’s position, and to truly stand in the same place as the other person.

Yet Paul, following Jesus, made himself a slave to all people. As one who had made Christ his Lord, he became like others with firm conviction, in order to lead even one more person to salvation. And that is not all. Paul is also speaking to the Corinthian church—and by extension to us who live today—calling us to follow this way of life. Let us look at verse 23. Paul gives another reason, beyond merely leading someone to salvation.

9:23 “I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”

Paul already knew the gospel. Then why did he say, “so that I may become a fellow partaker of the blessing of the gospel”? It is because the time when we experience the blessing of the gospel most deeply is, in fact, when we live for the sake of the gospel. When we deny ourselves and serve someone else, we finally realize, “Christ did this for me.” When we pay a cost, we understand how great Christ’s sacrifice was. When we experience loving without being repaid, we come to know how utterly one-sided the love of God is.

Conversely, without taking up our own cross, we cannot truly understand the cross of Christ. Without sacrificing something ourselves for the sake of the gospel, we cannot truly grasp what Christ sacrificed. That is why Paul says, “I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”

Everyone, here is the challenge for us. There is something I sincerely want to encourage you with from today's Word.

Try serving. Not only serving within the church, but serving someone in every aspect of daily life. Take the initiative. If you see a place where help is needed—not only what you are already doing—set aside, for the moment, whether it is your strength or your weakness. Believe that this will be a great spiritual blessing for you, and jump in.

And once you jump in, you must keep in mind that this is service, not something for yourself. Never seek something in return. Hold high the noble purpose of “for God and for people,” and work earnestly, sweating and laboring. You may feel like saying many things. But first, close your mouth and quietly move your hands in service. If possible, move your eyes and ears as well. Become sensitive to the needs around you. And when you notice a need, take the initiative to help. This is important, so I will say it again: close your mouth and serve quietly.

Then something surprising will happen. From that tightly closed mouth, words of complaint will begin to slip out. “Why am I the only one doing this?” “No one helps me.” “Not even a single word of thanks.” Such words will start to well up within you. Furthermore, you may become irritated with fellow church members who were supposed to be working together with you. You will begin to criticize and judge them in your heart: “That person isn't doing anything,” “They only talk but don't lift a finger,” “They think only about themselves.” Stress will build up. What began as complaints and grumbling may turn into anger, or even escalate into harsh words. And finally, you will think, “I'm done. I wasn't born to live like this.”

Go through all of that. And once you have, ask yourself this question: “Didn't you begin serving with the purpose of doing something for God and for others?”

At that moment, we are confronted with an undeniable and certain fact: that we are people who resent even moving a single finger for the sake of others; that we are lumps of self-centeredness. The more we try to live for others, the larger our own self becomes—and we honestly face that reality.

And when you realize this, kneel before the Lord and confess: “I am a sinner who can love only myself. Please have mercy on me.” Confess seriously, honestly, and from your heart.

Then you will understand. You will grasp the greatness, the depth, the breadth, and the height of the fact that Christ gave His life for someone as ugly as you. And at the same time, you will no longer be able to understand it. You cannot explain why Jesus gave His life for someone like you. You

encounter an extraordinary love that cannot be explained by logic. The meaning of the cross—what Christ did in order to set free someone like you, a slave to self-centeredness—presses upon your heart with indescribable emotion. And at that moment, a completely new feeling will arise within you. Gratitude and joy. Listen carefully: with that gratitude and joy, serve God and people once again. Simply respond to the love of Christ, and serve gladly with thanksgiving.

Let us repeat this experience throughout our lives. And when, in the end, the pure and untainted conviction “Lord Jesus, You alone are enough” is engraved upon our hearts, we will be completely free from ourselves. We will be free from the evaluations of others, from our own success, from worldly rewards, from everything in this world. Why? Because Christ alone is enough. Because we are filled with Christ.

At that time, we will truly be able to live as servants of Christ. And God will use such people to expand the work of gospel proclamation. From my heart, I pray that we may become such a serving flock. Let us pray.