



SESSION 6

LIFE ON MISSION

The Point

We can better share the gospel when we step into the shoes of others.

The Passage

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

The Bible Meets Life

We tend to define people by the demographics of our church and the circle of Christians we regularly encounter. People who match those characteristics certainly need Jesus, but so do people outside our circles. To share Christ with these other people requires us to take the gospel into their culture rather than expecting them to come into ours. This calls for us to step outside our comfort zones, but leading people to know Jesus is worth it.

The Setting

Paul wrote this letter to the church at Corinth about A.D. 56 while he was on his third missionary journey. He addressed many significant issues and questions the church was facing. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul encouraged the church to lay aside personal rights to reach people with the gospel. Such rights meant little if people did not come to know Jesus. Paul encouraged believers to find common ground with unbelievers to win them to faith.

What does the Bible say?

1 Corinthians 9:19-27 (CSB)

¹⁹ Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people.

²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law — though I myself am not under the law — to win those under the law.

²¹ To those who are without the law, like one without the law — though I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ — to win those without the law.

²² To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some.

²³ Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.

²⁴ Don't you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize.

²⁵ Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown.

²⁶ So I do not run like one who runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air.

²⁷ Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

GET INTO THE STUDY



10 minutes

Notes



DISCUSS: Invite your group members to discuss **Question #1** on page 121 of the PSG (Personal Study Guide): **“What do you like best about connecting with people?”**

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 122):

It’s a different kind of museum. When you walk in, someone will fit you with a pair of shoes that will be very different from your own. They may be the actual shoes a chess grandmaster has worn, or a roller derby player, or even a sewer worker. This is the Empathy Museum, a touring experiential arts exhibit based in England. The whole experience is designed to enable you to see the world through another person’s eyes.

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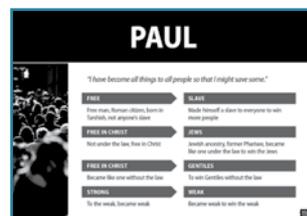
SAY: “This is not a new idea. The apostle Paul modeled this for us and taught us how to step into the world of others. We step into their world so that we can connect with them. We find a way to identify with them so they can discover their identities in Christ.”

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance, secure a shoe that is very different in size from one you might own. Display the shoe and ask: “What would it take for me to put on this shoe and walk around in it?” Discuss responses. Point out that it could be a very uncomfortable experience. Share that walking in others’ shoes often takes us from our comfort zones. Explain that today’s lesson focuses on how we can reach out to others with the gospel by “walking in their shoes.”

GUIDE: Call attention to **The Point** on page 122 of the PSG: **“We can better share the gospel when we step into the shoes of others.”**

PRAY: Transition into the discussion with prayer. Pray for those in your community who don’t know Jesus as their Savior as well as for opportunities to deepen your relationships with them.

TIP: This is the last session of this 6-week study. Be sure to offer group members a time to review and share what God has taught them through this study.



Display Pack Item #13 to use with your discussion of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 on page 154.

PLAYLIST PICK:

“My Victory”
By Crowder



STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (CSB)

19 Although I am free from all and not anyone’s slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law — though I myself am not under the law — to win those under the law. 21 To those who are without the law, like one without the law — though I am not without God’s law but under the law of Christ — to win those without the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. 23 Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

LEADER PACK: Bring your group’s attention to **Pack Item #13**, “Paul” poster, to give your group some biographical information on the apostle Paul.

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 123): In his travels, the apostle Paul experienced many cultural differences. The Roman Empire was massive, which meant it contained people from various backgrounds and cultures who viewed life differently. And they saw the gospel differently.

- » Paul made it his goal to share the gospel with all people regardless of their backgrounds. This is why he said, “I have become all things to all people,” (v. 22).
- » Paul even made himself “a slave” (v. 19) to this task.
- » Paul, a free Roman citizen and free in Christ, chose to serve these different people in whatever ways would influence them and bring them to Christ.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 123 of the PSG: **“How did you first hear the gospel?”**

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGES 123-124): Paul identified three different groups in his culture with whom he sought to interact:

- » **The Jews.** Paul was already a Jew. But under the grace of Christ, Paul knew he no longer had to follow the customs and rituals of the Jewish law. When he interacted with Jews, however, Paul would follow their practices as a way to win their trust and gain a hearing for his message. (See Acts 16:1-3; 21:23-26.)

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Commentary

Step into the shoes of others to share Christ. Verse 19: Paul began 1 Corinthians 9 by asserting that as an apostle, he had certain rights (1 Corinthians 9:1-14). Nonetheless, he recognized the exercise of those rights might hinder the spread of the gospel. Consequently, he laid aside those rights for the greater good (vv. 12,15-18).

In verse 19, Paul proclaimed “I am free from all.” We know from elsewhere in Scripture that he was born a Roman citizen and had certain rights associated with that citizenship (Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-28). However, for the sake of the gospel he made himself “a slave to everyone.” Paul did not mean that he actually submitted to the role of slave. Rather, he was describing his servant role as he served the churches. Paul adopted this strategy “in order to win more people.” He was all about reaching more people, whatever the cost.

Verse 20: Paul then affirmed “to the Jews I became like a Jew.” His comment seems strange at first because he was born a Jew (Philippians 3:5) and was an important leader among the Jews prior to his conversion to Christianity (Acts 26:4-5,9-11). Paul adopted this strategy to win Jews to Jesus.

The words “to those under the law” clarified Paul’s statement earlier in the verse. He ethnically was a Jew, but he was free from the law because of his relationship with Christ (Romans 7:4). Many in Paul’s day sought to keep the Law of Moses in order to be right with God. Paul said no one ever could be right by keeping the law, but needed God’s grace through faith in Christ (3:28). However, Paul did not want to give offence and needlessly turn people from the gospel, so for this group he became “like one under the law.” He affirmed that he himself was “not under the law,” because it no longer had the power to condemn him. At the same time, Paul felt free to submit to Jewish laws such as keeping kosher or observing the Sabbath. Such practices did not violate his conscience, and his observing them allowed him to step into the shoes of others to share Christ. Paul’s goal was to “win those under the law.”

Verse 21: Paul also reached out “to those who are without the law.” During the course of his missionary journeys, he often preached Christ to Gentiles who did not know the Law of Moses (Acts 13:46,48). As he ministered to these people, Paul became “like one without the law.” That is, he was not bound to follow the Law of Moses when he associated with Gentiles. To do so might have alienated him from sharing Christ with them because he would have insisted on practicing rules and regulations that in their eyes would have had no meaning or purpose. At the same time, Paul recognized that he was not “without God’s law.” Certain laws of morality applied in every situation (Romans 2:14-16). Paul always was careful to stay “under the law of Christ” as he lived by his principles. His goal was to “win those without the law.”

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Commentary (Continued)

Sharing Christ takes discipline and self-denial. Verse 22: Interpreters differ over whom Paul had in mind when he talked about the weak. The word likely denotes people who are weak in faith, whom Paul had addressed in the context (1 Corinthians 8:7-12). He accommodated himself to their weaker knowledge and did not participate in practices that caused them difficulty. Paul spoke sensitively of this group in the prior chapter, always maintaining the value of their immature faith. He did not want to do anything that might cause them to stumble spiritually (1 Corinthians 8:13). Paul affirmed “I became weak, in order to win the weak.”

Paul’s summary statement “I have become all things to all people” is often taken out of context. Churches naturally need to limit the number of programs they offer, and in such discussions someone might say, “We can’t be all things to all people.” Certainly it is true that we don’t have time to do everything, so prioritization is important. However, that was not Paul’s intended meaning. Paul meant he would step into the shoes of other people in order to better understand their contexts. He wanted to understand their lives, their goals, and their dreams because he wanted them to experience Christ’s love personally for themselves. Once they could see Paul’s care for them, they might be ready to hear about the Jesus Paul followed. Paul was determined to allow no unnecessary obstacles to come between him and people he was trying to reach.

Verse 23: Paul affirmed “I do all this because of the gospel” because he had come to realize that following Christ was his all-consuming passion (Philippians 3:7-11). Paul had a life of many accomplishments. However, these accomplishments paled in comparison to his relationship with Jesus Christ. As Paul came to know Jesus, he recognized that everything in life flowed from his relationship with Him. His relationship with Christ was more than the most important thing in his life—it was life itself (John 17:3).

Paul desired to share in the blessings of the gospel. One such blessing was the eternal life it brought to Paul. Another was the joy he received when people came to Christ through his ministry (1 Thessalonians 2:20). Paul understood the life-changing impact the gospel could have on people. He wept when people rejected its message (Philippians 3:18-19), and he deeply anguished for the Jewish people, most of whom rejected Jesus as their Messiah (Romans 9:1-5; 10:1-2).

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Commentary

Sharing Christ takes discipline and self-denial. Verse 24: Paul switched gears a bit to the arena of sports, using the illustration of runners in a race. All runners prepare for the race. However, “only one receives the prize.” All might put forth their best effort, but only one stands atop the victor’s podium. Paul encouraged the Corinthian church: “run in such a way to win the prize.” The Corinthians’ “competition” was life itself. Paul wanted them to win the prize that came from participating in the benefits the gospel brought.

Verse 25: Paul continued the parallel between athletics and the Christian life. “Competes” is the Greek word from which we get “agonize.” It denotes a dedicated effort to a task, whether physical or spiritual (John 18:36; Colossians 1:29; 1 Timothy 4:10). A focused athlete “exercises self-control in everything.” This phrase includes the ideas of both discipline and self-denial. Paul drew a parallel between the intense dedication of athletes and the intense dedication Christians should pursue to live life on mission. Those who compete in athletic contests “do it to receive a . . . crown” along with the accompanying glory. But Paul reminded the Corinthians that such a crown involved only temporary honor that would be perishable. On the other hand, we who compete for the cause of Christ will receive an imperishable “crown.” Paul had eternity in view; so should we.

Verse 26: Verses 26-27 describe the logical consequence to that truth. Paul competed for the sake of the kingdom. He was on mission, just as we should be. “I do not run like one who runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air” was not intended to put down those who competed in this way. Rather, he focused on the surpassing value of competing for an unfading crown (v. 25). Interests and worthy causes clamor for our attention. We must remember our ultimate purpose is to bring glory to God and to bring others to Jesus Christ.

Verse 27: The Greek word translated “discipline” also can mean “give a black eye to.” Here it has the sense of treating oneself roughly in training. Paul voluntarily limited his actions and priorities so he would have plenty of time to focus on the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. Similarly, the words “bring it under strict control” come from two Greek words that together literally mean “take into slavery.” In verse 19, Paul referred to becoming a slave for the sake of winning people to Christ. Here, he talked about enslaving his body for the cause of Christ.

Paul drew one final sports analogy. He disciplined himself so that when he “competed in his event” by preaching to others, God would not judge him as disqualified. Paul did not fear losing his salvation; he feared missing the opportunity to complete his mission. He wanted to serve fully and faithfully.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

SAY: "How will you step into the shoes of others this week?"

GUIDE: Lead group members to consider the responses to the Bible study listed on page 128 of the PSG.



- » **Pray.** Identify a person you personally know who does not know Christ. Pray for this person and ask for guidance in knowing how to bring the gospel of Christ into his or her life.
- » **Learn.** Choose an ethnic group that is different from you that you encounter regularly in your community. Become a student of their beliefs and customs and be ready to engage in conversation when the opportunity arises.
- » **Step out.** As a group, identify one way you can minister to a person or group that requires you to step out of your comfort zone. As you do, be ready for opportunities to share the truth of the gospel.

Wrap It Up

SAY: "You may never physically walk in someone else's shoes, but you can build relationships that give you insight into who they are. **When you do that, you get opportunities to share the gospel and connect with others the way Jesus did—by meeting them where they are.**"



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