

6

LIFE ON MISSION



What do you like best about connecting with people?

QUESTION #1

#BSFLidentity

THE POINT

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



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

It's called the Empathy Museum, but it's a different kind of museum than you may be used to. When you walk in, someone will fit you with a pair of shoes. They 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.

The Empathy Museum is designed to help you experience that old saying: "You can't understand another person until you've walk a mile in their shoes." It also functions a kind of library, although you don't borrow a book; you "borrow" another person—and you talk. You learn about that person, including his or her life experiences. The whole experience is designed to help you to see the world through another person's eyes.

What if we took that a step further? What if, instead of simply understanding the other person, we used that understanding to build a bridge? And not just any bridge, but a bridge to Jesus Christ?

That's exactly what the apostle Paul modeled for us in 1 Corinthians 9. And that's exactly what we need to do as disciples of Jesus.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

We speak a lot of languages in today's world. And I don't just mean English, Spanish, Swahili, or Chinese. Even within the same verbal language, we have a lot of different "cultural languages." For example, a twenty-something talks about life a lot differently than a senior adult. And people from the Northwest don't always "understand" people from the South.

In his travels, the apostle Paul experienced similar cultural differences. The Roman Empire was massive, which meant it contained people from various backgrounds and cultures, all of whom viewed life differently—and all of whom saw the gospel differently. Despite these challenges, Paul made it his goal to share the gospel with all people regardless of their background.

Paul understood that different people can be reached in different ways with the truth of the gospel. He was committed to this process, which is why he said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul even made himself "a slave" to this task; he was a free Roman citizen and free in Christ, yet he chose to serve these different people in whatever ways would influence them and bring them to Christ.

In this way, Paul followed the model Jesus left us: "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" (Mark 10:45).

How did you first hear the gospel?

QUESTION #2

That's critical, because Jesus is our best example for serving others and sharing the gospel.

In this passage, we see Paul reaching out to people where they were, not where he expected them to be. Specifically, Paul identified three different groups within his culture that needed the gospel:

- 1. The Jews.** Paul was a Jew, of course, yet because of the grace of Christ he knew he no longer had to follow the customs and rituals of the Jewish law. When interacting with Jews, however, Paul followed their practices as a way to win their trust and gain a hearing for his message (see Acts 16:1-3; 21:23-26.)
- 2. Those without that law.** These were the Gentiles. The best example of how Paul accommodated the Gentiles is his speech at the Areopagus in Athens (see Acts 17:22-31). He didn't dwell on the law or the Messiah; rather, he began by addressing their culture and the world they knew.
- 3. The weak.** Here, Paul was talking about the same weak people mentioned in the previous chapter (see 1 Cor. 8:7-13). Because these fellow believers had little understanding and a weak conscience, the actions of other believers could become a stumbling block. Paul identified with their situation in order to help disciple them in the gospel.

Paul was always flexible, and he was always willing to step out of his own comfort zone for the sake of the gospel.

We also may need to step out of our comfort zones, but we must do so without losing our own identity in Christ. Amazingly, through that process we can help others find their own identity in Christ.

What are some different approaches Christians use for sharing the gospel?

QUESTION #3

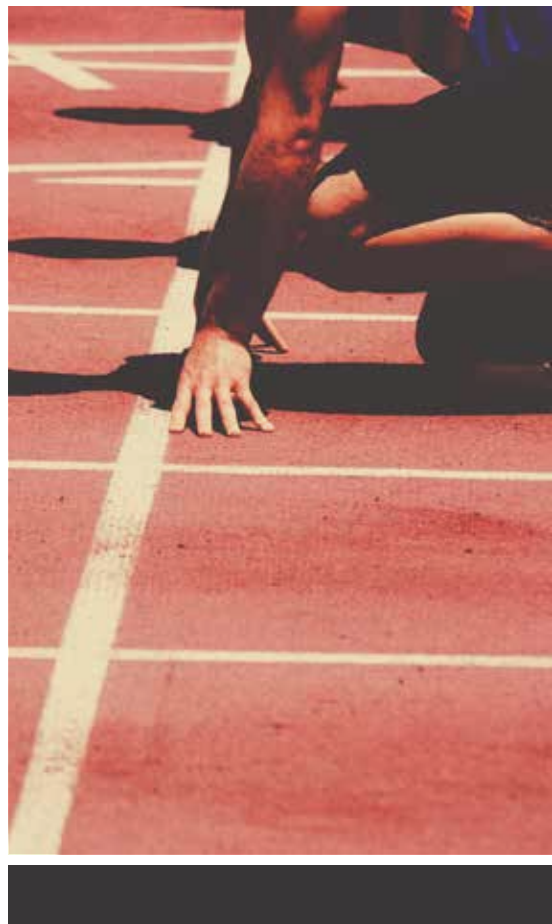
1 Corinthians 9:24-27

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.

²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Paul was fully committed to reaching anybody and everybody with the gospel. He didn't go through life "like someone running aimlessly" or "like a boxer beating the air." He had a specific goal and exercised discipline in his work.

To reach that goal, though, was never easy. Paul saw it as a serious task that required strict discipline and self-control. He underscored this by comparing the Christian life and ministry with an athletic race. Such an analogy was easy for the church in Corinth to understand because of the Isthmian Games held in their city every two years. These games were a big deal, second only to the Olympic Games. Unlike our modern athletic events, ancient athletes only won a prize if they took first place. The Isthmian Games didn't give gold, silver, and bronze awards—and certainly no "participation" awards were handed out. An athlete either won the race or went home empty-handed.



What is the prize for living the Christian life each and every day?

QUESTION #4

Out of their desire to win, the athletes in Corinth abstained from certain foods, sexual relations, and virtually everything else in order to focus on their race. Sure, a time of celebration and rest came after, but their goals required sacrifice as they prepared to run.

In today's world, athletes who discipline themselves to excel and win can receive a variety of prizes, from money, to gold medals, to the privilege of putting a "26.2" sticker on their cars. In Paul's day, the athletes won "a crown," which was nothing more than a ceremonial wreath of leaves.

That's quite a contrast to "the prize" that awaits believers who are disciplined in the life and ministry to which God has called them. Paul didn't explain what that prize is other than "a crown that will last forever." The only other reference Paul made to a prize was "the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). Still, we can be confident that this prize is eternal and of great value.

As we've seen, only one athlete won the prize in Paul's day. Even in our modern Olympic Games, only three competitors take the winners' stand in each event. But everyone who runs after Christ will win—assuming that, like Paul, we are disciplined and determined to "run in such a way as to get the prize." Interestingly, even Paul worked to remain disciplined in his life and service so that "I myself will not be disqualified." This wasn't a matter of losing salvation, but of missing out on the prize that comes from serving the One who saves us.

We all have days when we'd love to serve Christ by resting in a hammock. But serving Christ and reaching people with the gospel takes disciplined work and effort. As we rely on God's Spirit to work through us, we need to go where people are—and that often means stepping outside our comfort zones. It takes discipline and self-control, but it's worth it.

Keep your eyes on Jesus and look for opportunities to share your faith in Him with others. Your identity is in Christ. Take that identity, step into the lives of others, and lead them to find their identity in Christ.

What things might we need to set aside and pick up to run the race of faith well?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

How will you step into the shoes of others this week in order to share the gospel? Consider the following suggestions:

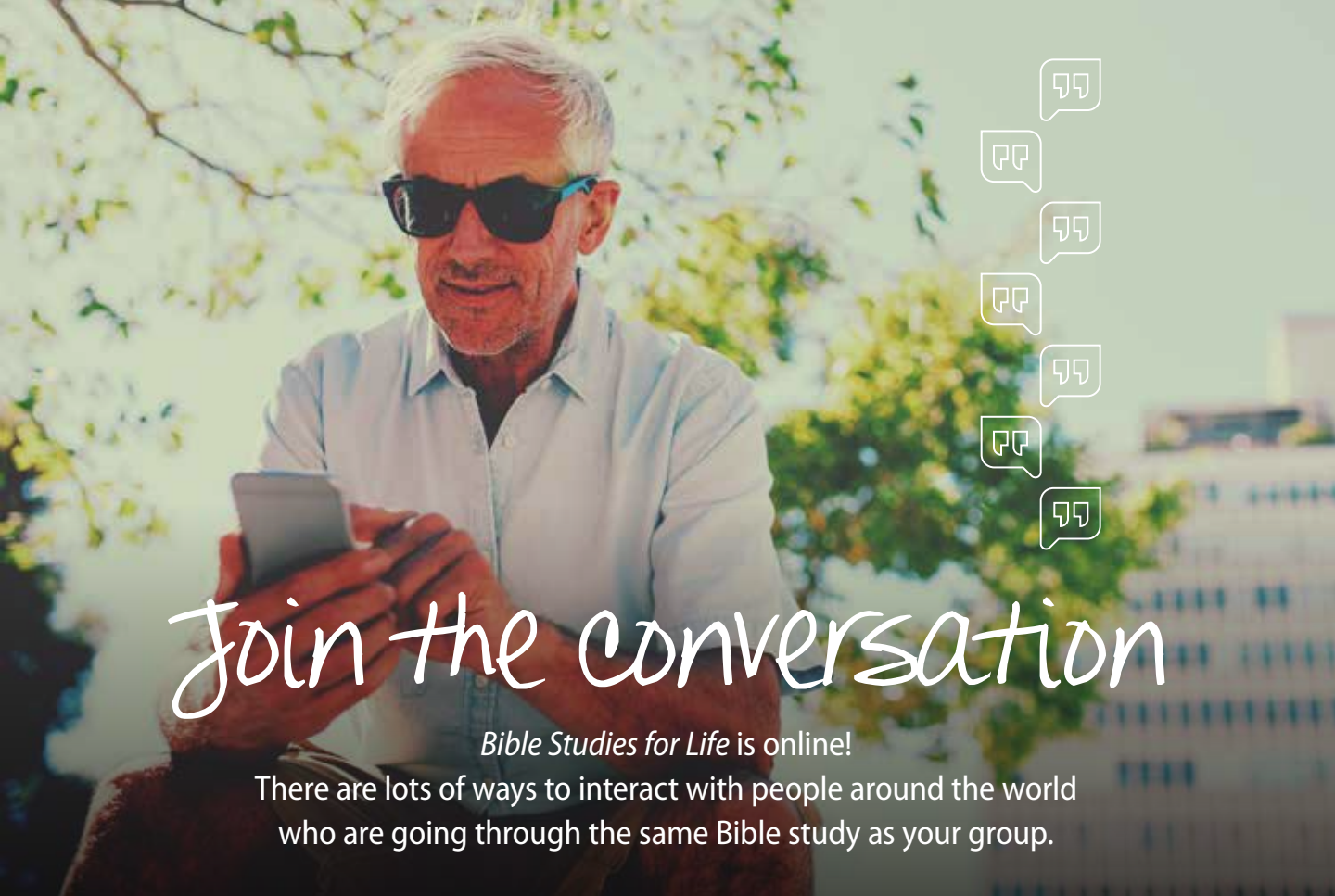
- ▶ **Pray.** Identify someone you know personally who still needs to follow Christ. Pray for this person each day. Ask for guidance and opportunities to be a witness.
- ▶ **Learn.** Work with a partner to study a specific people group in your community or around the world. Learn what you can about their beliefs and customs. Pray that the gospel would penetrate their culture. Ask God how you can get involved.
- ▶ **Step out.** As a group, plan a ministry project to serve a person or group—something that requires you to step out of your comfort zone. Seek a way to connect with that person or community in order to share Christ.

Walking a mile in someone else's shoes is harder than we often realize. But it's a necessary part of sharing the gospel with those who need to hear it. Are you ready?

My thoughts



Share with others how you will live out this study: **#BSFLidentity**



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COMING IN SUMMER

Real Relationships

SUGGESTED FOR
THE WEEK OF

June 4	Session 1	<i>Love Like Christ</i> <i>John 15:9-17</i>
June 11	Session 2	<i>Forge True Friendship</i> <i>1 Samuel 18:1-4; 19:4-7; 20:10-13</i>
June 18	Session 3	<i>Respect Authority</i> <i>1 Samuel 24:3-12</i>
June 25	Session 4	<i>See Their Worth</i> <i>2 Samuel 11:1-9,14-17</i>
July 2	Session 5	<i>Share Christ</i> <i>John 1:35-49</i>
July 9	Session 6	<i>Encourage One Another</i> <i>Acts 11:19-26</i>

Special Focus

July 16	<i>First Things First</i> <i>Haggai 1:2-13</i>
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Broken Vessels

July 23	Session 1	<i>A Fresh Start</i> <i>John 18:15-18, 25-27; 21:15-19</i>
July 30	Session 2	<i>Objections Overruled</i> <i>Exodus 3:11-12; 4:10-17</i>
August 6	Session 3	<i>The Gift of Grace</i> <i>2 Corinthians 12:2-10</i>
August 13	Session 4	<i>A Channel of Comfort</i> <i>2 Corinthians 1:2-7</i>
August 20	Session 5	<i>A Passion to Share the Gospel</i> <i>2 Corinthians 5:11; 14-21</i>
August 27	Session 6	<i>Right Here, Right Now</i> <i>Mark 5:1-2; 8-15; 18-20</i>