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

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.

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 chapter 9, Paul encouraged the church to lay aside personal rights in order to reach people with the gospel. Such rights meant little if people did not come to know Jesus.

What does the Bible say?

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

Under the law (v. 20)—Paul was referring to those still attempting to follow God by adhering to the legal and sacrificial system established in the Old Testament.

Not having the law (v. 21)—Refers to Gentiles, meaning those who never received the legal and sacrificial system described above.

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.

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.

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

GET INTO THE STUDY

10 minutes

Notes

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 121 of the PSG: **"What do you like best about connecting with people?"**

GUIDE: Direct group members to "The Bible Meets Life" on page 122 of the PSG. Introduce the topic of building a bridge between others and Jesus by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read on their own.

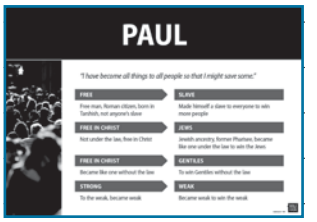
ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Supplement "The Bible Meets Life" (and appeal to the hands-on learners in your group) by challenging group members to build a bridge in your meeting space. Begin by directing everyone to gather in smaller groups of 3 or 4 people, then pass out a bag of large marshmallows and uncooked spaghetti noodles to each subgroup. Challenge each subgroup to build a bridge strong enough to hold a small weight—something between 2-5 pounds. Give each team about 5 minutes to complete their construction work, and then see which bridges can support the weight.

> ***Note:*** Another option would be to bring several weights to the group meeting, each one a little heavier than the last. Use a succession of these weights to see which team's bridge is the strongest.

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."**

LEADER PACK: Display Pack Item 13, "Paul," to provide group members with some background information on the author of 1 Corinthians.

PRAY: Transition into the study by acknowledging that there are those in your community who need to hear the gospel message. Pray that you and your group members will be better prepared to share that message as a result of your study together in this session.



5 minutes

STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

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.

READ: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 on page 123 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer to do so.

GUIDE: Use information from the third and fourth paragraphs on page 155 of this Leader Guide to help group members understand Paul's distinction between "Jews" and "those under the law."

SUMMARIZE: Help group members walk through the main points from pages 123-124 of the PSG:

1. "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.'"
2. "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)."
3. "In this passage, we see Paul reaching out to people where they were, not where he expected them to be."

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

Note: This does not have to be a conversion story; rather, you're asking when group members first heard the gospel message.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
How can we walk in the shoes of others without compromising our values?

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

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Commentary

Step into the shoes of others to share Christ.

[Verse 19] Paul proclaimed **I am free and belong to no one.** We know from elsewhere in Scripture that he was born a Roman citizen and had certain rights associated with that citizenship (see 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 a slave. Rather, he was describing his servant role as he served the churches. His own rights were not important; rather, the gospel was important.

The Lord Jesus previously took upon Himself the role of a slave and came not to be served, but to serve (see Mark 10:45; Phil. 2:7). Paul adopted this strategy **in order to win as many as possible.** He was all about reaching more people, whatever the cost. Today, we live in a society obsessed with personal rights. What rights are we willing to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel?

[Verse 20] Paul then affirmed that **to the Jews I became like a Jew.** His comment seems strange at first because he was born a Jew (see Phil. 3:5). He was an important leader among the Jews prior to his conversion to Jesus (see 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 (see Rom. 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 (see 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.

In all of these efforts, Paul's goal was to **win those under the law.**

[Verse 21] Paul also reached out **to those not having thelaw.** During the course of his missionary journeys, he often preached Christ to Gentiles who did not know the Law of Moses (see Acts 13:46,48). As he ministered to these people, Paul became **like one not having 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 **free from God's law.** Certain laws of morality applied in every situation (see Rom. 2:14-16). Paul always was careful to stay **under Christ's law** as he lived by his principles. His goal was to **win those not having the law.**

10 minutes

STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (Continued)

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.

GUIDE: Ask a volunteer to read the final two paragraphs on page 124 of the PSG.

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity "Assessment: Stepping Out" on page 125 of the PSG.

How often do you step out of your comfort zone in the following areas of life?

Meeting new people

[Rarely] _____ *[Daily]*

Offering to help those in need:

[Rarely] _____ *[Daily]*

Sharing the gospel:

[Rarely] _____ *[Daily]*

Asking for help:

[Rarely] _____ *[Daily]*

How can you enlist the Holy Spirit's help when it's time to step out of your comfort zone?

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 124 of the PSG: **"What are some different approaches Christians use for sharing the gospel?"**

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Commentary (Continued)

[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 earlier in context (see 1 Cor. 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 (see 1 Cor. 8:13). Paul affirmed **I became weak, to win the weak.** Again, the apostle laid aside his own rights and preferences to reach people who were at a different spiritual level than he was.

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, 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 the people he was trying to reach.

[Verse 23] We benefit from sharing the gospel. Paul affirmed **I do all this for the sake of the gospel.** Paul had come to realize that following Christ was his all-consuming passion (see Phil. 3:7-11). He 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 (see John 17:3).

Paul's words have powerful application for believers today. Many people would confess, "My relationship with Christ is an important part of my life." Others would claim, "I want to include God in my plans." But these statements fall short in light of Paul's comments. We cannot really separate anything in life from our relationship with Christ. We have various roles and relationships, but all other roles and relationships have meaning in relationship to that supreme relationship to Christ. Further, God wants to include us in His plan to reach the nations.

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 (see 1 Thess. 2:20). Paul understood the life-changing impact the gospel could have on people. He wept when people rejected its message (see Phil. 3:18-19), and he deeply anguished for the Jewish people, most of whom rejected Jesus their Messiah (see Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1-2).

15 minutes

STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

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.

READ: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 on page 126 of the PSG.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
Why are discipline and self-control so important in the life of a believer?

gets 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 as to get 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. Life on mission for Jesus means total commitment. We do whatever it takes to share Christ with others. As we do, we benefit from sharing the gospel.

[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 (see John 18:36; Col. 1:29; 1 Tim. 4:10). A focused athlete **goes into strict training.** The 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 get a crown** along with the accompanying glory. But Paul reminded the Corinthians that such a crown involved only temporary honor that would **not last.** We likewise see this in our own day: athletes win a championship one year but fail to win the next. Glory is fleeting! On the other hand, we who compete for the cause of Christ will receive **a crown that will last forever.** Paul had eternity in view; so should we.

[Verse 26] Verses 26-27 describe the logical consequences of that truth. Paul competed for the sake of the kingdom. He was on mission, just as we should be. **I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not box like a boxer 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. 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 **strike a blow** 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. The words **make it my slave** 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" and **preached 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 both fully and faithfully.

5 minutes

Notes

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 128 of the PSG. Encourage them to consider the following options for stepping into the shoes of others in order to share the gospel:

- **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.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the Conclusion from page 128 of the PSG:

> 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?

PRAY: Conclude by verbally accepting your responsibility to share the gospel. Pray for the wisdom to build bridges that will enable you to fulfill that responsibility in the days and weeks to come.

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COMING NEXT QUARTER

Real Relationships

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

Special Focus

July 16	***First Things First***	*Haggai 1:2-13*

Broken Vessels: How God Uses Imperfect People

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