

On Seeking Seven

A Study of 1 Corinthians 9:1-27

Big Idea: Clear the way.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 145:4; Matthew 9:35-38; John 1:1-14;
Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 10:32-33; Colossians 4:3-6; 1 Peter 3:15

Introduction:

1. Last week, I made the case that, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, then Jesus is sending you. He's sending you to seek and save the lost.

I got this from ► John 20:21, where Jesus says,

^{ESV} John 20:21 . . . As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

The key words are ► at the end: “I am sending you.” That’s the basis of our assignment: “I am sending you.”

And in this verse, Jesus tells us something important about the sending. He makes a comparison. He says ► that the Father sent Him, and in that same way, Jesus is sending us. He says,

^{ESV} John 20:21 “. . . As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

So Jesus is sending us for the very same reason the Father sent Jesus. Jesus’ purpose is our purpose. His mission is our mission.

And Jesus tells us plainly what that mission is. In ► Luke 19:10, He says,

^{ESV} Luke 19:10 “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

God the Father sent the Son for ► this purpose: to seek and save the lost. Now Jesus the Son is sending us for the very same purpose: to seek and save the lost.

The original words translated ► “the lost” literally mean the ones who are perishing, the ones who are dying, the ones who are being ruined.¹ Clearly, this refers to those whose sins have not yet been forgiven, those whose spiritual debts have not yet been paid, those who have not yet received the free gift of eternal life—in short, those who have not yet believed in Jesus Christ.

¹ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “ἀπόλλυμι,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

2. Last week, based on this premise that Jesus is sending His followers to seek and save the lost, I issued an important challenge to the church family here at Moon Valley. I urged you ► to seek seven. I encouraged you to ask God to use you to draw seven people a little closer to Christ in 2009. That's our New Year's resolution: to pray that God would use you to nudge seven people toward a relationship with Jesus this year.

But I told you not to worry about how you were going to do it. Not yet. For now, I just wanted you to ask God to help you identify your seven. That's the first step in this journey. To simply discover the seven God wants you to seek.

And I promised to go with you on this journey every step of the way. We're in this together. In the weeks and months ahead, my primary goal is to help you to seek your seven. My sermons are going to be about how you can seek your seven, and how I can seek mine.

So do you have your seven? If you don't, it's not too late. Ask God to help you identify your seven.

3. At the end of my sermon last Sunday, a couple of people asked me, "Bob, why seven?" Both the questioners were pharmacists, which gave me pause. I'm still trying to figure out the connection.

And I wish I had a more high-sounding rationale for choosing seven. But there's nothing really sacred about it. It's not even original. I first ran across the idea of seeking seven in a book I read for my doctoral class last fall.² And as I thought about it, seven seems like it's big enough—big enough to be a big part of your life, big enough to stretch you to reach out more, big enough to drive you to your knees to ask God for help. But at the same time, seven seems like it's small enough—small enough remember, small enough to be doable, small enough that you won't give up right away.

But seven is not sacred; it's just a suggestion. If you really want to pick a different number, go ahead. Just don't pick zero. Jesus is not sending you to zero.

4. This morning we're going to take another step. A step in the direction of seeking our seven. And we're going to do it by considering the example of the Apostle Paul as a seeker. We're going to go to school on Paul. He tells us some important things about seeking and saving the lost. We're going to look at what Paul has to say in ► 1 Corinthians, Chapter 9. That's the biblical text we're going to be studying today: 1 Corinthians 9. If you have a Bible with you, please turn there. If not, no worries; I'll be showing the verses on the screen.

² Ed Stetzer, *Planting Churches in a Postmodern Age*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 199.

We're not going to cover the entire chapter, line-by-line. Some verses I'll explain in detail; others I'll merely summarize.

- I. I want to begin with a key verse where Paul says that a big part of seeking and saving the lost involves the removal of obstacles. As such, seeking your seven will involve clearing some hindrances. Seeking your seven will include overcoming some barriers. I get this from ► Verse 12, where Paul says,

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 9:12 . . . we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

- A. The phrase ► “the gospel of Christ” is used by Paul 8 times in the New Testament. And he always uses it in reference to sharing the gospel with the lost—with non-Christians, with those who have not believed in Jesus for eternal life—that they might be saved.³

And, in nutshell, the gospel is this: By His death and resurrection for our sins, Christ alone graciously promises eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it. That's the good news.⁴

- B. And Paul doesn't want any obstacle to get in the way of this good news. The Greek word translated, ► “obstacle” is *enkoPAY*. That's the noun. The verb is *enKOPto*. It literally means to cut into. Originally, this was a military term used to describe the cutting of trenches into roads, making them difficult for the enemy to use. Over time it was used metaphorically to describe a temporary obstacle.⁵

So this word Paul uses conjures up a picture—a picture of lost people who are on the road to Christ. Paul says he doesn't want any obstacle to hinder their progress toward salvation. No trenches. No pot holes. No detours. The ► big idea is: Clear the way. Clear the way of any obstacle that keeps people from coming to Christ.

- C. Well, what obstacles does Paul have in mind? We'll get to that in a minute. For now, I want to rephrase the question: *Who* is responsible for the obstacles Paul has in mind? *Who*?

Paul tells us in Verse 12. Let's rewind the grammar. The object is ► “obstacle.” The verb is ► “put.” The subject is ► “we.” Now play it forward: ► *We* put an obstacle.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee, eds, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 411

⁴ Sharing the gospel with the lost that they might be saved is Paul's overriding concern. In Verse 16, Paul says, “. . . Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” And the Greek phrase “preach the gospel” does not carry the baggage our English translation has accumulated. It does not mean to give a sermon. It is not something reserved for clergy. It simply means to tell or to make known or to bring or to announce the good news about Jesus.

⁵ C. H. Peisker, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, Colin Brown ed. s.v. “hinder.” (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1967, 1969, 1971).

Paul is concerned that *we* believers may put an obstacle in the way of unbelievers. Paul has seen the obstacle and the obstacle is us! Somehow, *we* can be the problem.⁶

- D. And Paul says we ought to do pretty much anything to avoid being the problem. Bear any cost. Do whatever it takes. ► “Endure anything” rather than put an obstacle in the way of an unbeliever on the road to Christ. It’s a call to sacrifice for the seven. Clear the way.
- E. Why? We get a hint of Paul’s motivation. The hint is behind the Greek word translated, ► “endure” in Verse 12. Paul uses the word only one other time in his letter to the Corinthians. It’s in 1 Corinthians 13:7, where he says “love endures⁷ all things.” So, I think Paul doesn’t want to put an obstacle in the way of unbelievers because he loves them.⁸ He doesn’t necessarily *like* all of them. But he does love them with the love of Christ that will “endure anything” to see them saved.

Do I love my seven that much?

- F. Let’s ► return to the question I posed earlier: What obstacles does Paul have in mind? He gives us examples.
1. Paul spends the first 18 verses of Chapter 9 giving an example. He says that, as a spiritual shepherd, as an apostle, as an evangelist, he has the right to be paid by the church in Corinth. He has the right to expect the Corinthian church to meet his financial needs. Churches elsewhere had supported Paul in this way.

But apparently there’s a problem in Corinth. It seems that Paul is concerned that getting paid might be an obstacle. Some unbelievers in Corinth might think that he’s in the ministry just for the money. They might think he’s just one of those religious charlatans, and this perception might hinder them from moving toward Christ. So, to preempt that hindrance Paul clears the way. He refuses pay. He endures the hardship of no pay so as not to be an obstacle. Clear the way.

► ^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 9:12 . . . we endure anything [including no pay] rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

⁶ I don’t think we should read more into this than is really there. For example, we should not conclude that Paul thought he had the power to prevent people from going to heaven by his own hindrance, or, for that matter, that he had the power to manipulate people into believing in Jesus. This is inconsistent with Paul’s theology; it’s inconsistent with God’s sovereignty; and it’s inconsistent with the temporary connotation of the Greek word, “hindrance.” Paul is simply saying that he doesn’t want to make it needlessly difficult for people to come to Christ.

⁷ Or “bears” all things.

⁸ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, The Bible Speaks Today, John R. Stott ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985). 157.

2. And ► Paul gives more examples in Verses 19-23. He lists a number of different social groups. And within the limits of morality, Paul says he finds common ground with every group so as not to be an obstacle for any one of them. He adapts to their customs. He speaks their language. He is mindful of their preferences. Clear the way. For example, in ► Verse 20, he says,

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 9:20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.

This may seem like an odd statement, particularly since Paul was a Jew. But keep in mind that Paul is now a Christ follower. As such, he is no longer under Jewish dietary laws. He doesn't have to be kosher. In Christ, he now has the right to eat ham sandwiches.

But when he is with unbelieving Jews, Paul remains kosher—he “becomes a Jew”—so as not to needlessly offend them—so he can relate to them, and they to him. He surrenders his right to be non-kosher in front of unbelieving Jews because it would be an obstacle for them. So, to the Jews he becomes a Jew in order to win Jews.⁹ Clear the way.

3. The crowning statement of Paul's adaptability for the sake of the gospel of Christ comes in ► Verses 22 and 23, where he says,

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 9:22 . . . I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel . . .

Within the limits of biblical morality, Paul adapts himself to his culture. He surrenders anything that might be an obstacle—his freedoms, his rights, his comforts, his preferences—to seek and save the lost. Clear the way.

- II. Well, ► how do we apply all this to our situation today? Specifically, how does this help you and me to seek our seven? How do we clear the way?
- A. Let me pose a hypothetical situation that may seem completely unrelated at first, but just hang with me. I'll bring it around.

Let's say you leave here this morning and you drive down Bell Road. Bell has lots of car dealerships. You drive by one of the dealerships and they have a giant inflatable gorilla out front. And you see the gorilla and you think, “Mmm. Giant inflatable gorilla. Wow. That makes me want to buy a car.”

⁹ By the way, this is the way of Jesus. He became human that He might win humans (John 1:1-14).

And right next to the gorilla they have a giant day-glo sign. The sign says: “Free new car for you because we care.” No kidding. That’s what it says: “Free new car for you because we care.”

Now, I ask you. Would you feel compelled to do a u-turn and go immediately to that dealership so you can get your free new car? So you can be cared for? Probably not. I certainly wouldn’t.

Why not? Is it because the message is unclear? No. The message is quite clear. “Free new car.” “We care.” So, the clarity of the message does not seem to be the problem.

Is it because I don’t want a brand new car for free? No. I’d really like a brand new car for free. Is it because I don’t want to be genuinely cared for? No. I really like it when people care for me. So, the content of the message does not seem to be the problem.

So if it’s not the clarity or content of the message, what’s the problem? What’s the obstacle?

Well, to be honest, I blow off the message, I don’t believe it, I think it’s bogus, because I don’t trust the messenger. I think there must be a catch. It’s a sales gimmick. It’s a manipulation. It’s almost insulting. It’s not genuine. It’s about as real as the inflatable gorilla. They don’t care. They just want my money. That’s what I’m thinking.

And what I’m thinking may not be entirely fair. Actually, I don’t personally know anybody who works at that particular dealership. I just have this image, this perception based on a few experiences I’ve had at other car dealerships in the past. And my image of all dealerships has been tainted by my experiences. And the tainted image is the obstacle for me.

It is within the realm of possibility that the people at that dealership might be wonderfully caring people. I don’t know for sure. And, in reality, they might actually be offering me a free new car, no strings. I don’t know for sure. But I doubt it, and I’ll never find out for sure, unless the image obstacle is somehow cleared away.

- B. I don’t mean to pick on the people who work at car dealerships. Some are dear friends of mine. I just want to draw a comparison.

The Christian community suffers from an image problem. Our image as messengers is getting in the way of our message.

In America, our giant gospel sign has largely been read. Recent research shows that the vast majority of unbelievers in America have heard the gospel message.¹⁰ They can play back the basics of our giant gospel sign: We're sinners. Jesus died and rose again to be our Savior from sin. Faith is required to be saved.

Moreover, the vast majority of unbelievers in America have been to Christian churches at one time or another.¹¹ They've experienced it.

But they aren't buying the message. They aren't embracing the good news of Christ. Why? To be sure, many will choose to reject Jesus for who His is. We can't do anything about that. But I think part of the problem is that our image as messengers is getting in the way of our message. And we are responsible for removing that obstacle.

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 9:12 . . . we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Some recent research conducted by the Barna Group shows that, among young unbelievers in America, six broad themes generally characterize how these unbelievers view the Christian community. These six themes are explained in detail in a recent book titled, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons.¹² Here are the six ways unbelievers perceive us.

1. One. ► They think we're hypocritical. They say, "Christians say one thing but live something entirely different."
2. Two. ► They think we're too focused on getting converts. They say, "Christians are insincere and concerned only with converting others."
3. Three. ► They think we're antihomosexual. They say, "Christians show contempt for gays and lesbians."
4. Four. ► They think we're sheltered. They say, "Christians are boring, unintelligent, old-fashioned, and out of touch with reality."
5. Five. ► They think we're too political. They say, "Christians are primarily motivated by a political agenda and promote right-wing politics."
6. And six, ► they think we're judgmental. They say, "Christians are prideful and quick to find faults in others."

¹⁰ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 26.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kinnaman and Lyons, 41, 67, 91, 121, 153, 181.

These are obstacles. But they are interrelated, so perhaps we should think of this as one big obstacle with six parts. A kind of six-headed stereotype. Chances are good this obstacle—some version of this six-headed stereotype—stands between your seven and Christ. To some extent, we may have earned the stereotype. To some extent, it may be unfair. But whether it's earned or unfair, it is nonetheless an obstacle. How can we clear it away?

- C. Traditional forms of evangelism have focused on the message—just deliver the gospel message accurately, just tell them how they can be saved. And, to be sure, the gospel message is crucial and we must not water it down.

But we have a messenger problem. And if we don't deal with the messenger problem, I'm afraid our continued efforts to deliver the message will come off pretty much like more giant day-glo signs beside more giant inflatable gorillas.

So, in the weeks to come, I want to tackle each head of this six-headed stereotype to try to figure out how we can work together to clear the way. If you spend enough time in conversation with your seven, chances are good that questions are going to come up relating to these six. How will you respond? I want to help you. I want to clear the way without compromising in the slightest our commitment to the authority of the Bible.

- D. For ► now, I encourage you to find ways to simply invest in your relationship with your seven as a friend. No giant signs or inflatables. Just take them to lunch. Or chat with them while you're at work. Or while mowing the lawn. Or invite them over for dinner or dessert. Or go to a movie. Or invite them to the community theatre production of *Steel Magnolias* that's being put on right here at Moon Valley in a couple of weeks. Information is in the lobby.

It is in the context of a trusted friendship that you may have an opportunity to clear the way.