

Seeking the Lost

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Introduction.

My little sister has a good friend named Sara. Sara is a member of a certain denomination, and she is the perfect example of everything that denomination aspires to be. She doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, is moral in her personal life, dresses modestly, and attends worship services every time the doors are open. She's exactly the kind of non-Christian friend that parents want their children to have. As Susan has said about her, "She'd make a wonderful Christian if only she would switch churches." However, Sara has no interest in switching churches. She likes hers just fine, and if there's to be any church-switching going on, she thinks that Susan ought to join her denomination instead. As a result, both of them have spent the past ten years trying to convert the other. Neither has succeeded, and neither will succeed.

Believe it or not, Sara represents one of the biggest problems that Christians have with evangelism. When we look for friends outside the church, she is the classic example of the kind of friends we make: people who are already leading moral lives because of their strong commitment to another religious group. The moral life is a plus, but at least in evangelistic terms, the strong commitment is a huge, huge minus. It means that they are perfectly content with their religious life, that they think they've already found their way to God, and that they're not going to be interested in change.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, but the general rule about people like that is that they are not going to listen to the gospel. That means that if those people are our friends, and they're the ones we're trying to teach the truth, we're already about 95% likely to strike out before we even start. We are confining our evangelistic efforts to the category most likely to produce failure. We need to focus instead on the people who are highlighted as prospects by God's word. Who will and won't listen is often very surprising, but we need to pay attention as we are seeking the lost.

Who Won't Listen.

Let's begin with a consideration of several categories of people who, by and large, are not going to listen to the gospel. The first of these categories is the category of **THE SELF-CONFIDENT**. We see Jesus' encounter with some self-confident Jews in John 8:31-33. Jesus tells the Jews here that the truth He teaches will set them free, and they say, "What do you mean? We're already free!" They didn't think they needed help. Even Jesus could make no impression on hearts like these. In fact, by the end of the chapter, these same people are attempting to stone Him.

Let me tell you, brethren. The religious world around us is filled with people just like those Jews. The Jews said, "We're children of Abraham!" People today say, "I'm a member of such-and-such a denomination, just like my daddy was and my granddaddy was." The Jews said, "We're already free." People today say, "I'm already saved from my sins." Now, brethren, there's nothing sinful about trying to teach somebody with that mindset, but we need to be realistic about what our chances of success are. The gospel is the sword of the Spirit, yes, but those are folks who have encased themselves in the M-1 tank of the flesh. We can pound away all we want, but we can't expect to accomplish more than Jesus did, and all He managed to do was make them mad. We're better off trying with somebody else instead.

We're equally unlikely to find success with **THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS**. Look at Paul's comment about the self-righteous Jews in Romans 10:3. These were people who looked at their own lives and were perfectly convinced that they were doing everything that God wanted them to do. As a result, they had no interest in listening to the gospel, remained ignorant of the gospel message, and, unwittingly, remained in rebellion against the God they thought they served.

Once again, this is not a category of people that has died out since Paul's day. The self-righteous are still very much among us. Whether or not they go to church, they share a basic philosophy. They think they already have a firm mental grasp of what God expects from them, they think they live up to God's expectations, and so they classify themselves as "good people." Because they think they're "good" just the way they are, they have no interest in changing. They also have no interest in whatever Scriptures we might present to the contrary, except maybe to refute what we're saying and defend their own version of righteousness. We can't reach them because they don't want to be reached.

Similarly, we aren't going to make much headway with **THOSE WHO "SEE"**. Notice what Jesus says to people like this in John 9:39-41. The Pharisees were the religious experts of Jesus' day. They knew the Law of Moses and all the elders' commentaries on it forward and backward. They thought they knew who the blind people were around them—the people who didn't know as much about God's word as they did. When Jesus said that the blind would see but the sighted would become blind, they resented it and tried to opt out of Jesus' metaphor. Because of their pride and their certainty that they already had things figured out, they were worse off than the sinners who listened to the Lord.

There are plenty of people today who also think they have things figured out religiously. Sometimes this is based on years of formal education; other times, it's based on nothing more than what the TV preacher says. Whatever the source, though, they consider themselves spiritually learned, able to distinguish truth from error, able to direct their lives

and the lives of others. Sadly, almost all of the time, what people like this think they know just isn't so. However, we'll never be able to convince them of that. What we tell them that actually comes from the Bible doesn't fit into the mental framework that they've already developed, and because it doesn't match up with that framework, it doesn't matter that it comes from the Bible. They, not the word of God, are their own highest religious authority, and on their own authority, they decree that we must be wrong. When we're talking, they're basically standing there with their fingers in their ears.

Finally, we can't expect to find much fruit among **THOSE WHO "ARE"**. Paul describes the makeup of the church in Corinth with respect to this group in 1 Corinthians 1:26, 28. Notice that he doesn't say that there aren't ANY people with worldly significance in the church, but he does say that there aren't many. Instead, those people were largely shown up by the people who weren't significant. The have-nots instead of the haves became Christians.

Likewise, people today with a lot of wealth, a lot of power, a lot of status, are not going to be the ones most receptive to the gospel. The problem here is the same as it's been all the way through. They're people who are happy with what they have, so they're not looking for anything, so when we present them with the truth, they're probably not going to listen to it. We have more opportunity here than with some of the other groups, but it's still not much.

Who Will Listen.

So far, this makes evangelism sound like a grim and unrewarding task, but thankfully, just as there are groups who won't listen, there are groups who will. Along these lines, we first need to consider **PEOPLE IN TROUBLE**. Look at how this shows up in Isaiah 61:1-2. This is Jesus speaking prophetically, and He doesn't say that he's come to help the rich, the happy, and the free. Instead, the target audience of His gospel is the poor, the broken-hearted, and the captive.

The basic point here is that people will accept the help of Jesus when they think they need help, and few people are more ready to reach out than those who fall into disaster. When we suffer some painful or tragic loss, that's when we find out whether we really have the answer to life's questions or not. If we don't think that we have the answers, that's when we're willing to listen to somebody who does. As Christians, then, we need to pay attention to the people around us who are going through difficult times. Those times are sad to see, but they may have opened a door for the word.

We can find another door for the word when we encounter **SINNERS**. Jesus helps us understand what's important here with His words in Matthew 9:12-13. Of course, Jesus isn't saying here that there actually is some class of righteous people who have lived perfectly and don't need Him. He's saying that there is a group of people who THINK that they're righteous and so won't come to Him even though they do need Him. In just the same way, Jesus isn't saying that he's come to call sinners. That would be everybody. Instead, He's telling us that His call is for people who recognize that they're sinners, who look at the evil things they've done and say, "I've done wrong, and I need help."

Paradoxically, sinners like this are the people Christians are least likely to associate with. We see them and their wretched personal lives, and we say, "Ewww! I don't even want to talk to somebody like that." As a result, we never even find out if they're happy wallowing in their sin, or if they're looking for a way out. I'm here to tell you, friends: most sinners are not happy. They can't be happy because they're living a life that is incapable of making them happy. Much of the time, once they get over their astonishment that we're talking to them, they'll listen to what we have to say.

Similarly, we're much more likely to see success when we work with **SEEKERS**. We see Jesus' comments about this group in Matthew 7:7-8. We can't define "seeker" any better than to say that it's somebody who's unsatisfied with the status quo and is looking for change. We see this with the Bereans in Acts 17, who were seekers of truth.

There are many different kinds of seekers today. There are those who are irreligious and feel the absence of some sort of spiritual connection in their lives. Another big category is those who want some other change in their lives that has a religious aspect to it. The most prominent example of this that I can think of is people who have a love interest who's a Christian. Because they want some romantic attachment with the Christian, they're more open to religious discussion as well. As with all the rest of these groups, nothing is guaranteed with seekers, but it is an opportunity.

A final high-value class of prospects is made up of **THE HUMBLE**. God describes His attitude toward these people in Isaiah 66:1-2. There are two senses in which this word is used. First, it refers to people of humble economic status—the poor. Second, it refers to people who have a humble attitude, folks who don't think they have everything figured out already, who are willing to listen to another's opinion if it makes sense. God regards people like this with particular favor because of the way they regard Him. As the text says, they tremble at His word.

Of course, we can find humble people in both these categories today. Unlike the people who are satisfied with material riches, people who struggle financially are more likely to accept that they can't simply sail through life on their own without help. Likewise, people who have a wise and humble approach to listening to others will hear truth when it is spoken to them, whether it coincides with their own opinion or not. They have honest hearts. Once again, there are no guarantees with any of these people, but when we speak to those who will listen with humility, it helps a lot.

With this in mind, here's our homework assignment for the week. Let's each of us think through our lives, pick out three people who aren't likely to listen, then three people who are, and focus our evangelistic efforts accordingly.