

Dear Church
1 Corinthians 8

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“Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way” (Jesus in Luke 6:38 as translated by Eugene Peterson).

I remember having a conversation with a guy. He was about 50, his kids were out of the house, so he had the opportunity to realize his aspirations: he moved off grid, sort of. Of course, he lived close enough to civilization that when he needed food or a hospital or whatever, he'd be good. But for the most part, he picked a place off a road in the woods, where it'd just be him and his girlfriend to live as they pleased. No more demands on their life. Total independence. Total freedom.

When he was telling me this, I had one thought: “*That’s the dream.*” I mean can you imagine? Imagine getting to have something rather like this (watch online sermon to see photo). Anybody else? Anyone else have fantasies of moving off the grid to get away from it all—the demands, the expectations, the asks for help, the tasks at work, the needs of those you're responsible for? Ah, the dream. It may be a pipe dream, but it's THE DREAM.

I have a friend who does church planting in Boston. He moved his family there *specifically* to help bring the gospel to people. It was unpaid work; they had to raise money. They had to sell their car, use only public transportation, and set up and tear down their church stuff every Sunday—all while living on top of one another in a 680-square-foot apartment.

Literally he moved away from family, from comfort, from other lucrative job opportunities to take Jesus to people who didn't know him.

What's the difference between these two guys? One person moves away from people, the other moves towards them. One person seeks comfort, the other is moving out of his comfort zone. One person is looking to get his way in life, the other is looking to give away his life.

I had a friend express to me once that there are two kinds of people in this world: there are those who want to get their way in life and there are those who want to give away their life.

Everything about us prioritizes *getting our way in life* > *giving away our life*. Listen to this from David Foster Wallace:

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe: the realest, most vivid, and most important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on.”

Our culture doesn't help with this:

- Think about Apple Music/Spotify. Don't like a song? Don't want to hear commercials? Don't want to deal with weird radio giveaways? You can get your way. Apple Music or Spotify!
- Or think about DoorDash. Don't want to farm your food? Don't want to cook your food? Don't want to clean dishes after cooking your food? Don't want to drive to get your food? You can get your way! Doordash!

- Or there's Instagram filters. Is your picture looking drab? Is the contrast wrong? Is the lighting off? Is it not as cheery or warm as you'd like? You can get your way. Get a nice Clarendon filter, adjust the contrast, dabble with the saturation, and BOOM—great photo.

I could go on. Our culture is all about US getting our way in life. But is getting your way in life the way you get a life well lived?

The Apostle Paul would argue “no.” In fact, he'd flip the script. Paul would argue that *giving away your life > getting your way in life*. At least, that's what he'd argue in 1 Corinthians 8. Let me set the stage.

If you remember, Paul began his letter to the Corinthians by talking about unity. That's what chapters 1-4 are all about. There are divisions in the church, and Paul wants none of it. He wants the Corinthians to be unified around Christ.

Then in chapters 5-6, Paul switches gears and deals with things that he's been hearing about the Corinthian church. He deals with different reports that have come to his attention. He specifically addresses a case of incest in the church, he dives into reports about the Corinthians bringing lawsuits against one another, and then he addresses other forms of sexual immorality in the church more broadly.

When you get to chapter 7, things change. Paul no longer spends time talking about the reports he's hearing. In chapter 7, really until the end of the letter, Paul begins responding to questions that the Corinthians had written to him. Look with me at 7:1: “Now for the matters you wrote about.”

The Corinthians had questions about following Jesus. Chapter 8 discusses one of those questions. Here's the topic, super relevant: “Now about food sacrificed to idols...” (1 Corinthians 8:1). Like I said, *relevant*.

But take a moment and imagine you're a Corinthian. You moved to the big city. It's a coastal town so you can smell the salt in the air. It's got a thriving theater district and it's economically vibrant. As you explore the city, you see that there are temples all around celebrating the gods. You turn here and there's a temple to worship Poseidon. You turn there, you can pay homage to Artemis. Right down from your house is the temple dedicated to Dionysius, so it's a great location.

As you make your way around the city you quickly realize that there are many open marketplaces—places where people mill around and buy and sell goods, food, slaves. But you also notice that there are interesting little marketplaces at the *back* of the temples, which makes sense because whenever a sacrifice occurs and a temple priest takes a slab of meat off of an animal and offers it up to the gods, the gods don't actually eat it. They never seem to be very hungry.

Here's the thing about these pagan temples and their meat sacrificed to idols: they could either get rid of the meat or sell it. They *could* get rid of it, letting it rot and spoil and stink up the whole town, but where's the sense in that? Instead, why not sell it out the back door and make a little money on the side? In fact, maybe they could make a little more than a little money on the side—after all, this is meat sacrificed to *the gods*. Grade A meat. Offered up to Apollos himself. That's special stuff.

Now, imagine this man named Paul comes to town, preaching about a man named Jesus who was the Son of God. That there is only one God. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. Imagine that over the course of time Paul shares meals with you, shares his life with you, and convinces you that Jesus is the Messiah who died on a Roman cross but who also was resurrected.

What's funny is that when Paul sat in your house, he didn't present that message like it was hearsay. In fact, he said that he saw *with his own eyes* that Jesus had been raised from the dead and that he alone was

to be worshipped. He said God was the only God to be praised which meant that Poseidon, Artemis, Athena, Aphrodite, Apollo, and Hera *shouldn't* be.

Now imagine you heed Paul's message. You believe and are baptized. You give your life to Jesus. You denounce the gods you at once worshipped. But you're left with a dilemma. Meat is scarce. Inflation is high. Here's the question you have to face: do you eat the meat that's been offered to idols? Doesn't that mean you're participating in the idolatry?

What do you do? Some people who you know have been following Jesus for a while are buying this temple meat and eating it like it's no big deal. Other people are abstaining completely.

This was the question that was dividing the church. This is what the Corinthians wrote to Paul about. *What are we to do about meat sacrificed to idols? Some people think it's okay and for other people it's against their conscience because it feels like it's idol worship. What do we do Paul??*

The same kinds of discussions happen today, too. How do we solve issues that are morally grey, where some people think something is okay and others do not? How do we move forward?

This is the kind of thing Paul is responding to. "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'We all possess knowledge.' But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God" (1 Corinthians 8:1-3). Paul is saying, "Look, we know the idols aren't real and that eating the food is fine. But we also know that there's something better than knowledge and facts and having the right information; it's loving your brother and sister in Christ."

This past week I was sitting with some friends of mine and the "pet peeve question" was asked. One guy said his pet peeve is when people are concentrating and they stick their tongue out. Someone else said they hate when people are loud chewers. Me? I hate when people act like they know what they're talking about, but don't. This is called the Dunning-Kruger effect (watch online sermon to see illustration).

Anyone ever experience someone at the top of that peak there? Me, too. That's person is my least favorite person because that person is flaunting their knowledge to flaunt their knowledge. They're not really concerned with using their knowledge to love others, which is what Paul is confronting here.

Paul is saying yes, we all know that idols aren't anything but wood and stone, but "knowledge puffs up while love builds up." If your right knowledge isn't being used in the service of love, you've missed it.

Then he continues.

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)

Paul is making it clear that the idols are nothing. There is one supreme Creator, one Ruler, and Redeemer—God, the Father. He's also making clear that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom things were created and through whom we live.

Now, check this out:

But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. (1 Corinthians 8:7-8)

Paul is saying not everyone knows this for one reason or another. They're still conditioned to think of eating the food sacrificed to idols as idol worship, so it goes against their conscience to partake.

Paul says such people have a "weak" conscience. Typically, when we think of someone with a weak conscience, we mean someone who easily gives in to something that is wrong. But here, the person with the weak conscience is not the person who gives in, but the person who has an issue with something that is inherently okay. Nothing intrinsically evil about the thing, but they still struggle.

Now notice Paul doesn't tell the people with the weak conscience to get with the program and stop holding everyone back. He doesn't berate those who *don't know* to "just look at the facts!" Rather, Paul urges the ones who know better to take responsibility and give their lives away. He says, "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights [your right to do anything that is not intrinsically bad, like eating meat sacrificed to idols] does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Corinthians 8:9). That phrase "be careful" has to do with perception. It has to do with "having your eyes open for others."

And here's the reason why:

For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. (1 Corinthians 8:10-12)

Paul is concerned about the person's conscience.

Look at how Paul ends. He gives us the goal. He gives us a picture of what total self-giving looks like. "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall" (1 Corinthians 8:13). Paul literally says he'd become a vegetarian so as to not make a brother stumble. That's insane!

Where are you on this journey? Where are you when it comes to getting your way in life and giving your life away?

I came across this writer named Ronald Rolheiser who has a book called *Sacred Fire: A Vision for A Deeper Human and Christian Maturity*. Rolheiser lays out three phases of human experience that correspond to three phases of maturing in our faith.

We start in STAGE 1 – INFANCY PHASE. This is where, in life, we are born into the world and (generally) are taken to a secure environment with parents, elders, a family of some kind that is our own, and a place that is ours. This period of our lives is intended to be a secure time. We are completely taken care of. All our needs are met by those around us. We are home, we are secure, we are safe! But things change.

As we grow, we enter into STAGE 2 – JUVENILE PHASE. This is a phase of growing up designed by God to get us out of our homes. This stage hits us and almost works too well at times. We feel anxious, and desirous; we want to adventure, explore, get out from where we are. As Rolheiser says, "This is a time of much longing and searching: searching for an identity, searching for acceptance, searching for a

circle of friends...” and so on. This phase is full of questions like: Who am I? Where do I find meaning? Who will love me?

Normally, we work our way out of this stage (although it may take 5, 10 or 20 years) and into STAGE 3 – MATURITY PHASE. Here, we find ourselves in a new “home.” We have a place to live that is our own. We have a job, a career, a spouse, a vocation, maybe children, a mortgage, certain responsibilities, a certain status and identity.

And it’s here, in this last stage, that Rolheiser says, “Our question then is no longer, ‘How do I get my life together?’ Rather, it becomes, ‘How do I give my life away more deeply, more generously, and more meaningfully?’”

That’s a deep question. There are two aspects to giving our lives away, both found in this prayer by Kazantzakis:

- (1) I am a bow in your hands, Lord, draw me, lest I rot = USE ME!
- (2) Do not overdraw me, Lord, lest I break.
- (3) Overdraw me, Lord, and who cares if I break! = Allow God to use me as he wishes

How can we give our lives away more deeply, more generously, and more meaningfully?

It is, I believe, what we all search and long to be able to answer well. However, the truth is that not everyone can say, at the end of their lives, “I’ve given my life away. I have loved and loved deeply. I’ve given and given generously. I’ve served and served meaningfully.”

That’s what I’m about: giving my life away. I’m not perfect. None of us are. But God is calling us to mature into the kinds of people who say, “Take it! Take it! Take my life! I’m giving it all away! I’m leaving it all out on the court! No matter the cost, no matter the pain. I’m letting go. I’m relinquishing control. It’s not about me. It’s about my brother, my sister, my neighbor.”

The question for us is thus: how can I begin to give my life away? Two things:

1. We “take care”

Like Paul urged the Corinthians, we *look* for ways to honor our family and friends and their struggles.

- “Taking care” looks like one couple I know who have a lot of people in their life who struggle with drinking alcohol. And so, to not even provide an opportunity to have their own integrity in question and not even make the people in their life think drunkenness is okay, they abstain entirely. They have no issue with it in and of itself, but they “take care.”
- “Taking care” looks like a husband I know who noticed his wife needs the 3 Ts every day: time, touch, and talking. So he commits himself to those things—every day. And he “takes care.”
- “Taking care” looks like another gentleman I know. Very wealthy. Could wear the latest and the greatest. Could drive the flashiest and the coolest. Could own the biggest and the best. But he goes simple. Not because buying stuff is intrinsically wrong, but because he has people in his life who are skeptical of wealth and the way of Jesus. So, he “takes care” and foregoes flaunting it in any way.

- “Taking care” looks like the man who has learned that it is perhaps better in conversation with others not to have to have the last word. He has realized that playing the “I’m gonna get the last word in this conversation” game can bring others to anger. So, he “takes care.”

We take care not to cause our brothers and sisters to stumble. Where do you need to “take care?”

2. We lay down our rights

No one is saying this is easy. But this is the call. Will you give your life away?

This isn’t a government imposition. This is a question: will you give your life away?

“Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams” (Dostoyevsky).

This is the way. This is what God is calling us to. God is calling us not to get our way in life, but to give away our lives. Too many people are concerned about their own affairs. God needs people abandoned to him, surrendered to him, willing to risk it all, willing to love unconditionally, willing to step out with courage. He’s looking for people to become who he was for us in Jesus.

- Jesus took care – he saw us, he sees YOU
- Jesus laid down his rights – he died for us, he died for YOU
- Jesus went to the cross so we might be restored – so YOU might be forgiven

Jesus gave his life for us. He redeemed us. He gave us the example. Will you follow?

“Give away your life; you’ll find life given back, but not merely given back - given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way” (Jesus in Luke 6:38 as translated by Eugene Peterson).