

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

In offering himself as an example of giving up rights for the greater good, Paul shares a bit of his own life journey with his readers. And in so doing, we get a glimpse of how Paul truly lives. What we are shown is a man who is really about just one thing—that is, Paul is genuinely entirely caught up in what it is that Jesus has for him. All that he does, he does with an eye on Jesus' call on his life. The way he invests his time and energies, what he does when around others, how he masters his own body, are all flavored by and shaped by his one overriding passion: to make Jesus known to others. While we don't all share the same personal call that Paul did, we can learn a great deal about being people of "one thing" by listening to what he has to say.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

Perhaps the Lord of the Rings opening question might not work for your group. That is fine. Find another example. What we want to explore is the idea that people can, and do, live for overriding passions. This doesn't have to be reduced to thinking that people become "obsessive" and persevere in repeating one particular activity over and over; but it does mean that all people do live for overriding, central concerns.

The woman who sees her call as mom sacrifices and plans, prepares and reads, invests time and effort to be mom. It's not that she doesn't do "non-mom" things (like going out with friends, working in the garden, etc.), but behind it all and around it all and shaping it all is her overriding concern: How will I be the best mom I can be? The same is true for the businessman and the teacher, the student and the singer, the husband and the mechanic. We all have core concerns, central passions, which shape and flavor all we do. And beginning to think about that idea will open the way to understand what Paul goes on to say to the Corinthians.

When you turn to the text, it will be clear that there is more to be unpacked in these verses than you will be able to get to in a single discussion. So, we want to focus on one big idea: Paul's living for "one thing." Now we don't all share, in exactly the same way, Paul's personal call. And, because of that, we won't all live, in exactly the same way, with the same "one thing." But that Paul is a person who lives that way can be an inducement for us to see our lives in similar fashion.

When Paul speaks about preaching the Gospel "under compulsion" (9:16), he doesn't mean that he is not interested and

doesn't want to do that. What he is underscoring is that he didn't come up with the idea. The sharing of the good news is not his own thing. He has been given this call, invited into this life, by Jesus. And the result is that he understands the life he is living as a "stewardship" (9:17).

"Stewardship" speaks of a responsibility entrusted to one by another; the steward is doing what he or she is doing at the behest and to please another. And Paul understands his life that way.

He goes on to explain that he wants to faithfully and fully discharge that stewardship, so he does whatever he can in whatever situation he finds himself, to maximize the opportunity he has for carrying out that stewardship (9:19-22). He still takes trips, eats meals, visits with friends, buys groceries—he does all of life just as all those around him. But in and through all of that, Paul is aware of this overriding concern, this grand passion, and he thus does all that he does with an eye on that.

Notice the repeated emphasis on "all" in verses 22 and 23. He does all that he can in the company of all he comes in contact with to avail himself of all means so that others might hear the Gospel for which he is, ultimately, doing all that he does. He is a man of "one thing!"

When Paul turns to the sports metaphors, he simply underscores this picture. Everyone who runs a race runs, but not everyone runs and wins (9:24). Everyone who competes as an athlete makes self-disciplined choices so as to compete well, but they are only doing it for a fading prize (9:25). And the one who boxes does not randomly or idly punch the air, but fights with a specific aim (9:26). And Paul is saying that he lives that way: to win, to obtain an unfading prize, with aim.

Paul is not speaking about losing his salvation when he speaks of, perhaps, being "disqualified" (9:27). The word Paul uses literally means "to be disapproved"; the sense is "to be seen to not be what a thing was thought to be." (Think in terms of some mineral ore being tested, for that is where the word was used. Finding some rock and believing it to be gold it is taken through an "approval" process only to discover that it really was just some shiny metallic ore. The mineral would be "disqualified.") For Paul, that means that he wants to be seen to be one who has fully and rightly discharged the stewardship Jesus has entrusted to him.

What then is the big idea: That Jesus has called Paul—and all of us—to be "one thing" kind of people, given over to the life He has for us, living as if what Jesus wants for us is what matters most.

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
9:15-27

INITIAL THOUGHTS

In Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, every character lives for some overriding concern. Although they all might enjoy good food or delight in a spring day, beneath the every-dayness of life, each has a central passion. For Frodo and Sam, it is destroying the ring of power. For Legolas and Gimli, it is protecting the hobbits. For Gandalf, it is guiding and protecting the "fellowship of the ring." The characters live for their "one thing." And although it may not be as obvious to each of us personally, we too live for one (or a few) overriding concerns. Can you share about what is the "one thing" (or "things") in your life?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

In inviting the Corinthians to sacrifice for the good of others (in chapter 8), Paul offers his own life as an example (in the first part of 9). And then he unfolds a bit more of his own thinking.

What do you think Paul means when he says that he preaches the Gospel "under compulsion" (9:16)? How is that related to the idea of "stewardship" (9:17)?

What kind of things does Paul anticipate doing so as to faithfully carry out this stewardship he has been given?

How do the sports metaphors at the close of the chapter help you understand how Paul is thinking of his own life?

What would you say, from these verses, is Paul's one overriding passion? How does he intend to pursue that passion?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

We do not share Paul's personal call, but we could still be people of "one thing." How does Paul's single-mindedness challenge you?

In all you do and in all that Jesus has invited you into, what do you think He wants you to pursue as the one overriding concern or passion of your life?

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