Giving, Leading, Fighting and Loving
1 Corinthians 16

At first glance chapter 16 looks like a hotchpotch of travel plans and greetings and goodbyes. And yet, what you see is Paul deeply involved in a network of relationships. Just like you. And just like Paul, some of those relationships can be challenging, can't they.

There are those financially less well off than you, those under you - what are your responsibilities to them? There those over you - your boss, your leaders - how should you respond to them? And there are those you disagree with - maybe especially at the moment, how are you supposed to handle that?

Well, those are the issues Paul's dealing with here. And there's a thread running through them all. That just as the sacrificial love of Christ has influenced all the other issues he's dealt with, so it's going to radically impact your giving, your leading and your fighting.

Handling Money
Just recently I've been asked two different questions by two different people that I logged away, because the answer to both was the same. The first question was, why doesn't Westlake talk about giving to the church more? And the second was, why don't you pass a collection plate round on a Sunday?

And the answer to both is really the same. If you look at surveys as to why people don't go to church, one reason that keeps coming up is the feeling that churches are just after your money. Plus, when it comes to church scandals, money always seems to be lurking somewhere in the mix.

And so, as elders, we don't want to give the impression we're after your money.

And yet, when you read the Bible, you realise it never shies away from the subject of money, does it? The writers see the tremendous good that wealth can do, but they also see the bad. They see how money can get a grip on your heart and badly warp your decisions, but they also see how it can be put to work in ways that bring great good.

And it's the good that these Corinthians could do that Paul turns to. Verse 1: 'Now concerning the collection for the saints.' And the saints Paul's talking about are their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. Look how he describes them to the church at Rome: 'I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for *the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.*' (Rom 15:26).

So, some, if not many, of the Christians in Jerusalem are suffering financially. And it's not hard to guess why, is it? I mean, *financial* pressure has always been a way of applying *moral* pressure, hasn't it? Think about today. If a business owner steps out of line with our current cultural orthodoxy, they've got to be prepared for at best negative press, and at worse customers withdrawing their business, other businesses cutting their ties, and them being forced out of business.

And Christians in Jerusalem would almost certainly have faced the same. There would have been significant social and economic pressure to de-convert, and go back to Judaism. Customers might

stop buying your stuff, family might cut financial support, and your network of friends - which you'd depend on for work - might turn their backs on you.

Plus, famines were a regular occurrence and just like in some communities today, if you're viewed with disapproval by your community, then when it comes to getting your allocation of grain or aid, you can pretty much expect it's all gone by the time you get to the front of the queue.

And so this collection Paul is organising for the Christians in Jerusalem is not your common, every Sunday, collection for the work of the local church, it's special.

And yet, in the way Paul talks about it, there are some universal principles:

Firstly, giving should be **a priority**. Look at v2, '*On the first day of every week*, each of you is to put something aside.' So, imagine Mr Smith the Baker on the High Street in Corinth. He gets to the end of the week, thinks about giving, looks in the piggy bank and goes 'Man, I'd love to be able to give, but I just can't afford it.' And Paul says, so go to the piggy bank on the first day of the week. Leave your giving to the end of the week, or month, or year, and you'll probably find there's not much left. So, in the order of your expenses, in the order of your priorities, prioritise giving. Care for the poor was a hallmark of the early church, and it should be a hallmark of the 21st century church as well.

Secondly, our giving should be **regular**. Verse 2 again: 'On the first day of *every* week, each of you is to put something aside.' You see, Paul is planning to return to Corinth and collect up their gifts. And he doesn't want them, when he returns, or us at year end, to suddenly think, 'ah! Giving, forgot about that! Sorry!' Instead, he says, put something aside every week. Make your giving regular. Make it disciplined. And wherever you give, one easy way to do that is by setting up a regular bank transfer.

Thirdly, our giving should be **proportional**. Verse 2 again, 'Each of you is to put something aside… *as he may prosper*.' So Paul is not saying your giving should impoverish you. Rather, as your income goes up, so does your giving. And that can be hard, because as your income goes up, there is just this pull for your standard of living to go up - and you still feel like you can't afford to give. Because we think that our worth is tied to our wealth. How good we feel about ourselves, especially in comparison to others, is tied to our spending power. So if you wait for the day to come when you feel like you've got enough to give, that day will never come!

But Paul doesn't say what the proportion you should give is. In the Old Testament it was a tithe, one tenth, of everything they grew or earned. But the New Testament doesn't lay down a rule, instead it gives us freedom. But if you think about it, we know so much more of the grace and love of God than the people of Israel knew, so why would we give less?

Fourthly, there should be a **transparency** about your giving. Not that everyone can see what you give, but that you know how the money you give is being used. Look at v3: 'When I arrive, I will send those *whom you accredit* by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.' So Paul wants the Corinthians to pick the people they want to take this money to Jerusalem. He doesn't want to give any hint that it's going to end up in his pocket.

So, as you give, don't just give, take an interest in how your money is used. Now, of course, you're going to have to trust. Paul's not suggesting a culture of suspicion. When he talks about those taking the money he talks of them in the plural. It won't just be one person. He knows the temptation money brings. So take an interest.

Ok, but if the misuse of funds by others is *not* a reason *not to give*, neither is guilt a good reason *to give*. We need something better than cynicism or guilt to motivate us. And in Paul's follow up letter he gives them exactly that.

So, fifthly, our giving should be ***joyfully generous.*** You see, in Paul's second letter, he returns to this collection, and says, 'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich… Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.' (2 Cor 8;9, 9:7).

Think for a moment: why do we sometimes struggle to give, to be generous - and instead hold on? Because as we've said, we think our worth is tied to our wealth; but also because money gives us power - it gives us security. We just feel like we can manage life better with money in the bank. And Paul would say, 'yes and the sacrificial love of Christ for you answers both of those.'

Because Jesus is the greatest giver of all. He had everything, but gave up everything for you. He became poor to make you, who are spiritually poor, rich. And it's in his love for you, the value he puts on your life that you'll find your real value. And it's in his love for you that you'll find your real security.

So, Paul says, be shaped by Christ's generous love for you and then happily take your resources and use them to enrich the lives of others.

But, if love influences the way you treat those under you - the financially poor - it's also going to influence the way you treat those over you.

Handling Authority

In the UK, there used to be something called the YTS, the Youth Training Scheme. The idea was that young people in danger of dropping out of education were given a small wage while trained on a job, and given time to go to college. But there was always a bit of a stigma to it - like it was slave labour.

Well, when I was a junior doctor, the night nurses on the neonatal unit ran something they called the YTS. And it was basically their way of getting the junior doctors to do what they wanted. And if they liked you they made your job a joy and they'd let you graduate from the YTS. But if they didn't they made life miserable, and there was no way out.

And Timothy, Paul's protegé, was on the YTS. Verses 10-11, 'When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace.' And the sad truth is that some people in some churches can make pastors' - especially junior pastors' - lives miserable, because they can never be good or do enough. And Paul says, don't have that attitude. They may be junior, they may make mistakes, but see them - see Timothy - as doing the same work, for the same Lord, as me.

But this is not just for leaders *more* junior than us: Verse 15-18: 'You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they devoted themselves to the service of the saints - *be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and labourer… Give recognition to such people*.' So Stephanas and crew had been Christians longer than any others in Corinth, and clearly exercised some kind of leadership there. So follow them and honour them, Paul says.

But sadly, you can't take that for granted, can you? Because in a church, younger people can come up, or new people join a church, and in their zeal, trample over the oldies. Don't do that Paul says. Instead, recognise and respect them.

Ok, but think, why do we often struggle with those in authority over us? What's going on in our hearts when that's the case? There can be pride, can't there, thinking, maybe even knowing, that you're better than them. There can be fear - of toxic leadership. And there can be a desire to keep control - because you don't want others deciding things for you. They're the same reasons why can be harsh in exercising any authority we have.

Well, look at the kind of leadership Paul says should prompt us to lovingly submit. Look how he describes Stephanas and team: v15, 'they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints.' And v18, 'They refreshed my spirit as well as yours.' So this is leadership that's not about the image or the platform of the leader, but of devoted service and refreshing the hearts of others.

It's what Paul modelled. Look how he talks about Apollos: v12, 'Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.' Now, that might seem like nothing to you. But remember how there are people in Corinth, dividing into factions, saying, 'I follow Paul', 'No, I follow Apollos.' And yet Paul has zero hesitation in asking Apollos to go back there. Number one, because he trusts Apollos, but number two, because Paul's ministry has never been about Paul but about Christ. And he just doesn't see Apollos as a competitor.

But neither does he try and coerce or strong-arm Apollos to go. He wants him to go, but he doesn't force him to go. He gives him the freedom to decide for himself and he accepts what he decides.

You know, there's a type of tree whose sap is so acidic that nothing can grow in its shade. And there's a type of leader like that. No one can grow in their shade. But Paul wasn't like that. Because Jesus isn't like that.

You see, when it comes to loving submission and loving leadership, Jesus is the ultimate example. The Father sends him on a rescue mission that will cost him his life, and he goes. He perfectly submitted to the Father's authority. But he was also the ultimate servant leader, who came not to be served but to serve. Who lead, and leads, in ways that refresh: Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

And it's as you see him leading by serving, laying his life down for you, that you'll find the trust and humility to follow good and godly leadership, and exercise leadership in ways that allow others to thrive.

But that doesn't mean everyone will agree with you, leader or not.

Handling Threats

Verses 8-9: 'I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, *and there are many adversaries*.' So Paul knows the Lord has work for him in Ephesus, and yet he's facing all this opposition. And the temptation when that happens is to think, life's too short for this, I've had enough, time to move on. But Paul's response is different. For him, facing opposition is not a reason to quit but to stay.

And not just for Paul. Look at v13-14: 'Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.'

Now, why would your average Christian, or church, in Corinth, or Lausanne, need to be watchful? To be on guard? It sounds like the kind of thing you'd say to a soldier, doesn't it? Exactly. It's the kind of thing you'd say to someone facing an enemy, facing attack by stealth.

Ok, but for a church, for Christians, what's that going to look like?

Well, look what he says next, 'stand firm *in the faith*.' So this is about the gospel, about the truth. About standing your ground and guarding against anything that compromises, or waters down, or distracts us from the gospel. Because there are any number of things that can do that, aren't there? Then and now. That can come along and say, you shouldn't believe that any more, that's so regressive; or, this is what you should give your time, your efforts, your thinking to. And Paul is saying, no, those attacks will come, so stand your ground on the gospel. Keep the main thing the main thing.

Now, why do we sometimes struggle to do that? Either to stand by our principles, and the truth, and be a person of integrity, even if it costs us? Or be led off on to standing on some other ground than the gospel - and thinking, this is what's most important? Often, because we fear men. The opinion of others can matter too much to us, so we back down, or follow them rather than Christ.

So, look what Paul says next: 'act like men.' And the verb Paul uses is the verb used by the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the command to soldiers like Joshua on the eve of battle: Joshua 1:9, 'Be strong and courageous… for the Lord your God is with you'. Joshua, you face an enemy. There is going to be a battle. Not everyone is going to like you. So… be bold, be strong, because God is with you.

And you and I can be courageous for truth, and act like men, even if naturally we feel timid and mouse-like, not because we're strong, but because Christ is Immanuel, God with us. Because his opinion of you is ultimately the only one that matters. And when you know that it gives you great confidence. As Paul says in Romans 8:31, 'if God is for us, who can be against us?'

But there is a danger with fighting for truth. You can become a street fighter, a culture warrior, and you begin to see everyone as an enemy. Even your brothers and sisters. And you forget they're your brothers and sisters and agree with you on the truth of the gospel, but because they disagree with you on secondary stuff you begin to lob grenades at them.

Which is why Paul adds, 'Let all that you do [even the fights you pick] be done in love.'

You see, one of the reasons we can become harsh in the way we defend the truth is the same as why we can cave in. The fear of man. Others' opinions matter too much to us. We give them too much credit. And we forget God is God and Christ has triumphed.

You see, only the gospel can give you the humble confidence you need on the battlefield of truth, because only the gospel tells you you are loved win or lose the argument. Only Christ can make you tough and tender.

All toughness and you'll spend your days fighting. All tenderness and love and truth will just become sentimental goo. But in Jesus we see ultimate toughness and ultimate tenderness. The One who confronted religious hypocrisy while extending mercy to tax collectors and sinners. The One who violently cleansed the temple and then welcomed children. The One who sent away the accusers of the woman caught in adultery, leaving them in no doubt that they too stood accused, and then turned to her and said, 'Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.' The One who at the cross bore all the physical and spiritual horror of our sin and yet prayed, 'Father, forgive.'

He is perfect toughness and perfect tenderness.

Verse 23, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.' Because when you know that Jesus gave up everything for you, that he's your king, tough and tender, you'll grow more like him. And you'll handle your wealth, and authority, and threats the way he did, with love.