

What happens when *you* live?

Part 2, how to be fully alive

By Will Messenger, pastor
Charles River Church
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Charles River Church

Powered by God for life.

Last week I talked about three things that can keep you from being fully alive — self-absorption, wallowing in disappointment, and compartmentalization. I got those by looking at what happened to two of Jesus's followers who met Jesus on the road to a village called Emmaus. They met Jesus after he had died and become totally alive again, but they couldn't even recognize him who was totally alive, because they were self-absorbed, wallowing in disappointment, and compartmentalizing their faith apart from their experience of the life right in front of them. Last week's Bible reading showed what happened to them because of those barriers. This week, let's talk about how to overcome those three barriers.

Start by looking at the last verse of today's Bible reading (1 Corinthians 13:13). "There are three things that will endure — faith, hope, and love — and the greatest of these is love." Hmm, three barriers that keep you from being fully alive, and three things that make you fully alive — that "endure." I wonder where this could be leading. Could it be that faith, hope, and love are the solution to self-absorption, wallowing in disappointment, and compartmentalization? Yes.

Start from the bottom, with compartmentalization. The solution to compartmentalization is faith. Maybe I'd better say what I mean by *compartmentalization* and what I mean by *faith*.

Compartmentalization is when you divide your spiritual and moral self into pieces, and you only use the pieces that happen to be convenient to you at



any time. If you are married to one person, but romantically involved with someone else, that's compartmentalizing. Because the only way you can do that is to shut out the spiritual connection and moral responsibility you have with the person you're married to. If you are honest as the treasurer of the school PTA, but you cheat on your taxes, that's compartmentalizing, because you are shutting out your moral center when doing your taxes. (If you embezzle from the PTA and cheat on your taxes, that's not compartmentalizing, but just plain being a thief.) The key here is that compartmentalization means shutting out part of your spiritual and moral self at times when they don't seem convenient.

Compartmentalization is *not* when you draw boundaries of time, or function, or emotion. If you answer email at work, but you don't answer email at home, that's not compartmentalizing. That's just good time management. If you reveal more of yourself to some friends that you do to others, that's not compartmentalizing, that's just setting good personal boundaries. If you set aside your feeling of anger if your spouse slights you, so that you can concentrate on

1 Corinthians 13

¹If I could speak in any language in heaven or on earth but didn't love others, I would only be making meaningless noise like a loud gong or a clanging cymbal. ²If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I knew all the mysteries of the future and knew everything about everything, but didn't love others, what good would I be? And if I had the gift of faith so that I could speak to a mountain and make it move, without love I would be no good to anybody. ³If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would be of no value whatsoever.

⁴Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud ⁵or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. ⁶It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. ⁷Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

⁸Love will last forever, but prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will all disappear. ⁹Now we know only a little, and even the gift of prophecy reveals little! ¹⁰But when the end comes, these special gifts will all disappear.

¹¹It's like this: When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. ¹²Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now.

¹³There are three things that will endure—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

(New Living Translation)

being the parent your child needs at the moment, that's not compartmentalizing, that's just good self-discipline — as long as you later go back and deal with your anger at a more constructive time. I guess you use the term "over-compartmentalization" for what I'm calling just plain "compartmentalization." OK. The key point is that dividing your spiritual and moral self is bad, while maintaining boundaries of time, or function, or emotion is not necessarily bad. Do you understand what I mean? This is really important, spiritually, and I will gladly spend the rest of our time today discussing it if anyone has a question or clarification they want to bring up. [Invite and discuss any questions or comments.]

OK, the solution to compartmentalization (or "over-compartmentalization," if you like) is faith. What do I mean by faith? Faith is when you allow the truth that you live by, into a part of your life that is scary or depressed or broken or has some barrier keeping you from being fully alive. Let me give an example. When I was a Boy Scout, my troop met on Monday evenings in a church — the same church I went to on Sunday mornings. In the basement were the Sunday School classrooms. On Sunday mornings, I skipped through those classrooms without a care in my mind. But on Monday nights, with the lights off, in the dark, I was scared to go down there. All the young boys in the troop were scared. We made a game of it, to dare each other to walk alone, all the way through that pitch-black corridor, and up the stairway at the other end. No running. You had to walk slowly through the dark. Meanwhile the other boys were doing their best werewolf imitations from the top of the stairs.

Those walks were a test of faith. The truth I lived by, was that there are no goblins, werewolves, ghosts, the boogiemans, vampires living in the Sunday school classrooms of St. John's church. On Sunday morning, I never once looked for werewolf droppings or vampire beds in those rooms. I went to Sunday school, drew my pictures, and ate my cookies and juice perfectly happy. But on Monday nights, I sometimes lost my faith that there were no werewolves and vampires there, and sometimes it made me too afraid to walk through that corridor. I wanted to walk through the corridor — because if you didn't you'd get teased by the older boys — but I wasn't able to, because I couldn't bring the truth that I lived by most of the time, into that particular situation. Or, if I did get in touch with my faith that there are no vampires in the basement of St. John's, then I could walk through the corridor. I remember what a spiritual accomplishment it felt like when I first realized that the nighttime basement of St. John's didn't scare me any more.

So when I say faith, I'm not talking about a particular set of beliefs that you're supposed to have. I'm talking about the truth you live by. Not a set of propositions that you give intellectual assent to, but the way you live your life. Seen in this way, faith is something everyone has. You either have faith that getting out of bed will help you get the things you want for the day, or you have faith that it won't. You live by some truth, either getting up is worthwhile or it isn't. If a friend hurts you, you either have faith that they really still like you, or you have faith that they really don't like you. By the way, these examples show that faith isn't only a religious topic. You live by faith in all areas of life, not just things having to do with God. By the way, if you read the rest of book of 1 Corinthians in the Bible, you'll see that this is how the word faith is used throughout it — as a way of life, not a set of beliefs.

So I hope you can see how faith is the exact opposite of compartmentalization. Faith is when you allow the truth you live by to be active in a difficult area of your life. But compartmentalization is when you disallow the truth you live by to be active in a difficult area of your life. Faith is when you're filling out your taxes and you say, honesty is the right thing to do here, like everywhere else. Or if you're a believer in God's goodness, faith is when you say, God is taking care of me financially, and God is going to take care of my need to pay taxes. Compartmentalization is when you're filling out your taxes and you say, I can lie here, because this is only the government, and everybody does it, and I'll be honest next year when money's not so tight. Or, if you believe in God's goodness, compartmentalization is when you say, God is taking care of me financially, but God isn't going to take care of me enough to meet needs and pay my taxes.

Faith overcomes compartmentalization. God says he loves you, as you are right now. If you have faith in that, then you are loved on Sunday morning in church. And you are loved on Friday night in a bar — you don't have to go home with a stranger just to make yourself feel lovable. God has given you gifts, skills, talents, things you can do that are worthwhile to others. If you can bring faith in those gifts into your job, you don't have to work unreasonable hours, or step on top of rivals, or take ethical shortcuts for fear of losing your job. You might lose your job, but you can live by the truth that your gifts, skills, and talents will still be worthwhile to others, that you'll be able to find work, that God will provide for your life without requiring you to cut actions off from your spiritual and moral self. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus overcame their inability to recognize Jesus when Jesus helped them apply their faith from the scriptures that God is at work in the world to that very moment they were in: Oh my God, God IS



present in the world, right here, right now, and not just in the scriptures. It's Jesus, God's son, alive, here, now.

Here's what you can do with this. Is there an area of your life that you're compartmentalizing, that's cut off from the truth you live the rest of your life by? (If you made the self-documentary I suggested last week, you may already have a scene that fits.) What truth that you live your life by needs to be lived in this area a lot better? That's the truth you need to apply to be more fully alive. I'm going to give you half a minute to think about it and maybe write it down now.

Look next at wallowing in disappointment. The solution to wallowing in disappointment is hope. Wallowing in disappointment is when you cling to the shadow of what's lost because you can't imagine anything good ever coming along again. You can see why that's the exact opposite of hope, because hope is when you let go of the shadows, and move towards what the future has in store. Take a look at this clip from *The Two Towers*,

Gandalf says the world's hope lies in two small hobbits, and voila, we see the two small hobbits about to walk into the Black Land. They are bitterly disappointed. They believe Gandalf is dead. They've been mistreated by the men of Gondor, who are supposedly their greatest allies. But instead of clinging to their disappointment, they set out again in hope. And here's the key: their hope is true hope, not wishful thinking. True hope is hope that has a foundation in



reality, even though what you're hoping for is bigger and more wonderful than anything you've seen yet. Wishful thinking is not founded in reality. If Sam had said, "I hope I see the Dark Lord face-to-face, cause I'm so angry I could whup his hide bare-handed," that would be wishful thinking. Sam is no match for the Dark Lord, angry or not, and he knows it. But instead, Frodo calls Sam, "Samwise the brave," and Sam accepts that. There's a foundation in reality to believe that Sam is brave. He jumped in the river to catch up with Frodo, even though he's terrified of water. He stands up to Faramir when Faramir begins to mistreat Frodo, even though Faramir could have him killed in an instant. There is a bravery in Sam that it makes sense to place hope in, even though so far it's a small bravery. And in the end it is Sam's bravery — Sam's giant bravery — that saves the day when he storms the Tower of Cirith Ungol to rescue Frodo after he's captured by orcs.

Hope overcomes disappointment. Fredrick Buechner says "What's lost is nothing to what's found, and all the death that ever was set next to life would scarcely fill a cup"¹.

Here's what you can do with this: Is there an area of your life where you're wallowing in disappointment, where you're clinging to the shadows of what's gone, rather than moving towards what tomorrow must bring? What would you have to hope for in order to stop clinging? Would that hope be a true hope or wishful thinking? Take half a minute to think about that and maybe write it down.

Finally, look at self-absorption. The solution to self-absorption is love. Self-absorption is when all you care about narrows down to just yourself. That's a huge barrier to being really alive, because there's more to life than you! It's a good thing to want yourself to be fully part of life around you. But it's a terrible thing to want yourself to be the only part of life you care about. That's why it would probably be a torture to go to heaven without being redeemed by God. Imagine if you went to heaven just the way you are now, or the way you would be without God's cleansing. It would be like magnifying all your worries, doubts, sins, failings to infinite magnitude, and then having to live with them forever. Maybe that's why Jesus said that the only way to heaven is through himself, because anywhere you would go without Jesus would be a hell of your own making, with you not just as Supreme Being, but with you as the *only* being. That's what self-absorption is.



The solution is love. Love is when you care about someone else, simple as that. In other words, it's the exact opposite of self-absorption. So here's what you can do with this: Is there an area of your life where you're self-absorbed, where the only thing of interest to you is you? Friendship where you don't actually care about your friends, but only about how they make you feel? Or money, where all you care about is how much money you have, and not what it took to get that money, or who it could be used for besides yourself? I think I'm in danger of self-absorption all the time, if I'm really honest about it. So if there is an area of self-absorption in your life, choose to love someone else specifically in that area. If your friendships are actually a form of self-absorption, do something gigantically wonderful for a friend, something that is directly opposite to your self interest. Like call them up after a day you know was bad for them, and just listen for two straight hours, without ever once giving advice, or telling how something similar happened to you. Either that or give them your tickets to today's Red Sox game against Baltimore, and \$30 for parking too. Or if money is

¹ Religion & Ethics Newsweekly May 5, 2006, Episode no. 936

something that makes you self-absorbed, give away a big wad of it. Like a thousand bucks, today. If nothing better strikes you, give it to World Vision and write "Darfur" in the memo line. If you do something like that, you will so free, so alive, it might strike you dead! (Dead to your self-absorption, that is. Alive to life.). Take half a minute now to think about where you might be self-absorbed, and what action you could take to love someone else instead.

So, that's all there is to it. Are you compartmentalized? Faith! Are you wallowing in disappointment? Hope! Are you self-absorbed? Love!

There's only one problem. You can't do it. You can't faith like that. You can't hope like that. And above all you can't love like that. If you could, you wouldn't be compartmentalized, wallowing in disappointment, and self-absorbed in the first place. And this brings us, at last, to 1 Corinthians 13.

First the passage lists some things people *can* do. People can speak in languages, both human and supernatural. People can play gongs and cymbals. People can tell the truth, even about the future sometimes. People can fathom mysteries, and get amazing knowledge of everything you can think of. People can move mountains, if they stick with it long enough. People can give to the poor. People can sacrifice their bodies, while they're alive to work or sports or, after their dead to medical science. But people can't love. Not really. Not enough. You can't love enough to overcome your own self-absorption, or hope enough to escape disappointment, or faith enough to be whole instead of compartmentalized.

Why not? Listen to what it takes to love: "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. Love will last forever." I'm not able to love like that. To *never* give up. To *always* tell the truth. This passage is not talking whether you have the *right amount* of love, like moving up from sometimes telling the truth to usually telling the truth. It's talking about whether you have the *right kind* of love, like making truth the very air you breathe. If your love falls short of what this is describing, you don't need *more* love. You need a *new kind* of love. A perfect kind of love.

That's the kind of love Jesus has, not more love, but better love, perfect love. That's why God raised Jesus to eternal life. For Jesus, eternal life is not a torture because he's not self-absorbed, even though all things were created through him. He's not wallowing in disappointment, even though the people he came to save killed him. He's not compartmentalized even though he is fully human and fully God. Don't settle for the kind of faith, hope, and love you can generate in yourself. Go for the kind of faith, hope, and love Jesus has.

How do you get perfect love? It's like growing up., according to our passage: "When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I grew up, I put away childish things." Spiritually, you and I are still children. "Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now." Now we're in a state of childhood, spiritually speaking. Children handle the situation of being children, by joyfully depending on their father and mother every day. (Assuming they have a good mother and father — if not then it's not so joyful.) Children don't have what it takes to keep themselves alive, so they gladly receive life from their parents. Children don't have very good skills, so instead of trying to get more of what they have, they try to learn new kinds of skills. If a child merely tried to crawl harder, they'd never learn to walk. If you just try harder to love your way, you'll never learn to love God's way. So all you really have to do is to be God's child. It's a kind of childhood where you get to choose your mother and father, and you can choose to be a child of God. "To be a follower of Jesus" is really another way of saying "to be a child of God."



So, overcome your compartmentalization with the truth you live your life by. Overcome your disappointment with hope. Overcome your self-absorption with love for others. But not on your own. That would be the gospel of trying harder. Ugh! I hate that gospel. Try the Gospel of Jesus, that God will give you the life you can't give yourself. Don't try to do love with your own power, but do it like a child who needs God's help every day. All you have to do is ask. Even Jesus didn't rise to new life on his own, but received new life like a child, the Son of God.