

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 AM

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[0 : 0 0] Father, may the riches of your grace shine through the poverty of my words, so that the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts may be pleasing and acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our Maker and our Redeemer. Amen. You may be seated. If you could open up one of the Pew Bibles to page 953, because it is Pentecost to Sunday, I'm actually going to start us in 1 Corinthians chapter 2.

There's this marvelous little place, 1 Corinthians chapter 2, verse 9, where Paul quotes the Old Testament and says, It is written, What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.

These things, verse 10, God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the deep things of God.

Verse 12, Now we have received not the Spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God. Why? That we might understand things freely given to us by God.

[1 : 1 7] And it strikes me that as we come to chapter 15, nowhere is Paul more clear about the things that are freely given to us by God. And they are words that are profoundly familiar, if any of you have been Christians for any amount of time, and so we need the gift of the Holy Spirit to give us fresh understanding, to help us experience the weightiness and the glory and the joy of the grace that God holds out to us through 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

If you look at verse 1 of chapter 15 with me, this is on page 961, Paul says, Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the gospel I preached to you.

Verse 3, For I delivered to you, as of first importance, what I also received. Christ died, Christ was buried, Christ was raised, and Christ appeared.

This is a stunning little passage. I mean, after 14 chapters, Paul decides, Now I'm going to tell you the things of first importance. I would think about all the territory that Paul has covered so far.

I mean, in this letter, can you imagine hitting any more hot-button topics than Paul hits? Now think about it, church divisions and personality cults, sexual ethics and lawsuits and church discipline, adultery and homosexuality and marriage and singleness, eating food sacrificed to idols and rights-based ethics, head coverings in the church and male and female relationships, the Lord's Supper and how it reflects class distinctions, the use of spiritual gifts, especially tongues and prophecy, the nature of love, and last week, how love limits the way in which we speak when we gather together with one another.

[3 : 0 3] Can you imagine a letter that covers any more hot-button topics than that? And yet, it's only as we near the very end of the letter that Paul finally comes out and says, Hey, I want to remind you, these are what matters of first importance actually are.

Now, why does Paul do this? Why does he wait until the end to give us the matters of first importance? I think it's because Paul realizes that one of the temptations in the Christian life, well, there's a couple temptations in the Christian life.

One is for us to begin with matters of first importance and then to move on to other things. Or, when we try to live out the Christian life, we realize that there are so many complexities, there are so many issues that we have to navigate in our life, that we get absorbed with giving attention to all the things that we feel like are weighing us down and that need our attention, the things that Paul is talking about in this book.

And then we lose sight of the main thing. So what Paul wants to do at the very end of his book is he doesn't want to leave us with a warning.

He doesn't want to leave us with instruction. He doesn't want to leave us with another ethical teaching and deliberation. He just wants to bring us back to the center. He wants us to keep the main things the main thing.

[4 : 19] He wants the final note in our ears and the final taste on our tongues to be seeing and savoring the gospel of Jesus Christ. He wants it to ruminate in our minds and stir the affections of our hearts.

Because Paul knows better than anyone, we're going to discover that it is the gospel and the gospel alone that brings life where there is death, and light where there is darkness, and spiritual health where there is illness, and holiness where there is sin, and joy where there is sorrow, and unity where there is division, and mission where there is stagnation.

Only the gospel can do this. And so Paul brings us back at the very end of his book to the first things. And he gives us a three-fold pastoral reminder of how we are to keep the main thing to main thing.

He says to us why the gospel matters, what the gospel is, and how the gospel transforms. So first, why the gospel matters. This is in verses 1 and 2.

According to Paul, the gospel is the beginning, and the middle, and the end of the Christian life. It is the power of God for salvation. So look at verse 1 again with me. Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

[5 : 52] Did you notice there are the three little verbs that describe the relation between the gospel and the Christian? There are three verbs, past, present, and ongoing, in which you received.

It's a past action. In which you stand, it's a past action that has ongoing significance for the present. And then by which you are being saved, it is a present action that continues into the future.

And do you notice by that way of describing the relationship between the Christian and the gospel, there's a progression going on as well. It's from something that we did to something that is true of us to something that is being done to us.

It is a gift that is received that once it is received becomes a power that is at work in us and holding us and transforming us and keeping us. And so one of the things that the Apostle Paul is trying to hold out to the Christians in Corinth is that the Christian never outgrows the gospel because the Christian is defined by its relationship to the gospel.

As one preacher once put it, growth in the Christian life is simply growth in seeing that the gospel is true. That Jesus Christ is the preeminent reality of our lives and of all things.

[7 : 11] I think this is why Paul speaks about the possibility of believing in vain at the very end of verse 2. It's a word that can mean a couple different things. It could mean careless and thoughtless on the one hand, but it also could mean fruitless and to no purpose.

Careless or fruitless. In verse 10, Paul uses the word again. He says, But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.

I think it means there was not fruitless or to no purpose. Again, he uses the same word in verse 14 of the chapter. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain.

Why? Skip down to verse 17. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. In other words, your faith is fruitless.

Once again, we find the word at the end of the chapter in verse 58. Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

[8 : 18] It's not fruitless. In other words, I think Paul is saying that if Christ was not raised from the dead, then our faith in the gospel is in one sense fruitless.

It's futile. It's in vain. Everything according to Paul, we're going to discover in chapter 15, is crystal clear. It rests on the fact that the gospel is true.

And growth in the Christian life is simply growth in seeing that the gospel is true, that Jesus Christ is alive and risen from the dead, that he rules and reigns, that he is the Lord and the Savior, the beginning and the end.

He is the one by whom we have been saved and in whom we are being saved. And if that is not true, then Paul is right. Indeed, we have believed in vain. I think this is why in this passage, the veracity of Paul's teaching and the fruitfulness of our believing are closely wed together.

And I think that's why Paul outlines the gospel in the way he does in verses 3 to 8, with a special focus on key historical events and the historical basis for receiving those events as true.

[9 : 34] And so Paul moves from why the gospel is important is that which is saving us, and then he moves on to tell us what the gospel is. And he tells us right away in verse 3, I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.

Notice the gospel is not something that he made up. It is something that he received in his delivery. The gospel here is not a social construct or a philosophical system or a political movement or an ethical ideal or a mystical experience or a religious sentiment.

It is a revelation and a gift with a discernible content and contours. I think one way to put it is that the gospel is a particular person and particular events revealed to particular people in a particular order at particular times and places.

There are four verbs. Verse 3. He died. He was buried. He was raised. And he appeared. And then the fourth verb is repeated four times.

So verse 5. He appeared to Cephas and to the 12. Verse 6. He appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time. Verse 7. He appeared to James and all the apostles.

[10 : 57] And lastly, verse 8. He appeared also to me, Paul. So notice how the gospel is not just particular person and particular events, but it is also the eyewitness public appearances of the risen Christ to particular leaders of the church, including Paul himself.

They are the ones that have received this gospel directly from the source of the gospel, Christ himself. And this word for appeared, it's the word from which we get ophthalmology.

I can't say that word. Ophthalmology. It's that Greek word for sight. It's a visual word. So Paul is talking about here not just a wonderful religious emotional experience of the person of Jesus, but he is talking about people who actually saw the risen Lord Jesus, flesh and blood.

They could touch him and they could see him. They could hear him and they could speak with him. And so Paul's main focus here in his articulation of the gospel is its historical nature, but I think his main point is in its transformational power.

It's because Christ really died and really was buried and really was raised and really appeared to hundreds of people and really is alive and active in the world that Paul's teaching of the gospel of Christ is not shallow and hollow and in vain, but really has the power to transform lives.

[12 : 30] We're talking about a living person here. It's because Christ really died and really was buried and really was raised and really appeared to hundreds of people and really is alive and active in the world that faith in the gospel that Paul preaches will not be fruitless or futile or foolish, but really will save and transform.

And that's what Paul leads us to in verses 9 to 11. These are verses that often get overlooked when this passage is preached.

But Paul, having described why the gospel matters as that which is saving us and which alone can save us, what the gospel is, he now talks about how the gospel can be transformed, transformative in our lives.

verse 9. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God, but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is with me. Throughout the letter, have you noticed how the apostle often shares his life as an example or a parable of what it looks like when somebody is gripped by the gospel of grace?

[13 : 57] So, in chapters 1 and 2, he says, I come to you and I don't speak in eloquent words of wisdom and rhetorical savviness in ways that's going to draw attention to how clever I am.

I just come to you speaking plainly Christ crucified and nothing else because I want you to be left with the power and the wisdom of the cross. In chapters 8 and 9, he comes to them and says, I do not insist on using my knowledge and my rights for my own gain and protection in your midst, but I gladly give up my rights so that others will come to see the beauty of the gospel of the king who gave up his rights for the sake of saving his people.

He will not, and so Paul holds himself up as an example. Or again, in chapter 14, we just saw when he's talking about spiritual gifts, Paul says, I would rather speak five words of prophecy with my mind than 10,000 words in a tongue if it means that others will be instructed and built up in the body of Christ.

So Paul's constantly holding himself up in some way as a parable and example of what it looks like when someone is gripped by the gospel of grace. And here, he brings it into the sharpest possible relief.

He says, he is one who persecuted the church and he has now been given a God-given ministry to the church as an apostle and he lives a life that serves the church as a model.

[15 : 25] And he tells us how this can be in verse 10. Three times, he uses the word grace or God's grace. It's by grace and it's toward grace and it's with grace. Grace initiates and grace sustains and grace completes a total transformation of the whole person and we see that in Paul.

His nature, his identity, his purpose and his work are all transformed by the grace of the living God. Notice how in verse 9, Paul focused on his complete lack of qualification or merit or strength for the ministry that he's given.

But if you look prior in verse 8, you realize that his focus is not just on his total unworthiness, his focus is also on his total helplessness. And I just want to say trigger alert here.

The kind of language that Paul actually uses is quite graphic in verse 8. He says, Last of all, as to one untimely born, Christ appeared also to me.

That language as of one untimely born is the image of a baby that was prematurely born or aborted. And so the image that Paul is using to describe himself is not just that he is completely unworthy, it's that he is completely helpless.

- [16 : 47] And that's why the reversal that grace brings in verse 10 is so dramatic and comprehensive because God's kindness and mercy not only addresses Paul's unworthiness, I am what I am by the grace of God.

His identity and sense of self has been completely changed in Christ. But the gospel of God's kindness and mercy also addresses Paul's helplessness, his sense of agency.

Did you see that he says, I worked harder than any of them, yet it was not I but the grace of God that was at work with me. So we have two things happening here.

The grace of God works toward us to make us into new people and the grace of God works with us and within us to empower us to do a new work as new people.

I think this is an astonishing thing because it shows us that the gospel does not make us passive people. The gospel makes us active participants in the work of the Lord.

- [17 : 50] I think this is why Christians make a distinction between earning and effort. There's this author named Dallas Willard who once said, grace is not opposed to effort, it's opposed to earning.

Earning is an attitude, a spiritual posture towards God. Effort can be an action and a response to God. And I think this is one of the reasons why Paul uses the verb hold fast in verse 2 in relation to believing the gospel.

It is a certain type of Christian activity that takes God-empowered effort. The gospel that is saving us, as it is saving us, produces and sustains in us a desire and a capacity to hold fast to the gospel that is saving us.

the Christ who is saving us produces in us and sustains in us by his Holy Spirit a desire and a capacity to hold fast to him and to the words about him.

So I think the picture of the Christian life that Paul gives us is a Christian life is a matter of holding fast to the one who is saving us. It's kind of like my son if he's scared of heights or he's scared of a certain situation he grabs onto my arms and he says daddy save me daddy save me daddy save me right?

- [19 : 22] But my arms are about twice as big as his and I know I'm never going to let him go but he's clinging to me with all his might. It's the same verb hold fast that's used in the parable of the sower in Luke chapter 8.

But it's used at the very end. So remember the parable of the sower some seed falls on the path people hear the word of God but then the devil right away comes and deceives their hearts and takes away the goodness of that word from them.

Some seed falls among the rocks people hear the word of God and initially they receive it with joy but when trials come when temptations come when testing comes when suffering comes they wither and they fall away.

Some seed falls among thorns people hear the word of God but as they journey along their faith as they see the ways of the world they get choked out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life.

But some seed we're told by Jesus falls on good soil and upon hearing it what do people do they hold fast to it it's the same word with an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience.

- [20 : 39] I think one of the questions in which Paul's explanation of the gospel gives us is not only do we see afresh the beauty the simple beauty of what Christ has done that he has died he was buried he is raised and he has appeared he is alive and well and ruling and reigning in the world do we believe that that is good news?

But Paul takes it one step further than just do we believe Paul says are you actively holding fast to that gospel as that sustaining source of life without which your faith will be fruitless?

Are you actively and deliberately holding fast to the gospel of Christ or are you passively drifting and complacently going with the tide? So it's one of the things that is so marvelous about this massive letter where Paul covers every conceivable topic is that near the end Paul wants to simplify the Christian life for us.

Growth in the Christian life is coming to understand matters of first importance and never getting beyond the glory of matters of first importance. He reminds us to keep the main thing the main thing in the life of the church.

Why the gospel matters what the gospel is and how the gospel transforms. the Christian life is a lifelong holding fast to the word of Christ who is saving us and the Christian life is believing that he is more than powerful to keep us to the end.

[22 : 14] Brothers and sisters I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The Father is a contagious■ of the Lord and of the Holy Spirit and Gud