

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 PM

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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. For those of you that don't know me, my name is Jordan and one of the ministers here at St. John's, and it is a rich privilege to be in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 with you. If you'd please open one of the Pew Bibles to page 961. We have been in this letter for quite some time, almost the better part of a year, and we are starting to near the end.

And as we near the end, Paul does a very peculiar thing. He tells us what is most important, and he waits till the end to do it.

Now, throughout this letter, Paul has touched every imaginable hot-button issue. I mean, just let me go through the list with you. The first 14 chapters, it's astonishing to say it all.

Church divisions and personality cults. Sexual ethics and lawsuits and church discipline. Adultery and homosexuality and marriage and singleness. Eating food offered to idols.

[1 : 3 6] Rights-based ethics. Head coverings and male-female relationships in the church. The Lord's Supper and class distinctions. The use of spiritual gifts, especially tongues and prophecy. The nature of love.

And last week, the limits that love places on speech when the church gathers together. It's hard to fathom a letter that could cover more controversial topics than that, right? And yet, Paul waits until chapter 15, and he says, in the beginning of chapter 15, he says, now these are the things that are of first importance.

It's as if going through that whole list of things and all the topics, Paul doesn't want us to get distracted from what is really the heart of the matter. He wants us to learn at the end of this letter how to keep the main things the main things in the Christian life. How to keep the main things the main things in the church of Jesus Christ. And so, verse 1, he says, now I remind you, brothers and sisters, of the gospel that I preached to you. Verse 3, for I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died, that Christ was buried, that Christ was raised, and that he appeared.

So, why does Paul wait until the end to give us the most important things? And I think it's this. Because Paul knows that all the list of things that he has just talked about, some of these things are going to be really concerning to us. Some of these things are really going to hit home in a very pointed way. Some of these things are going to be hard things for us to swallow. And yet, what he wants is for the final note ringing in our ears to be the sweetness and the goodness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He wants the final taste lingering on our tongues and the final thoughts ruminating in our minds and the final affections stirring in our hearts just to be the glory of what Christ himself has done for us.

[3 : 35] And the fact that he is alive and he is active and he is Lord and he is ruling and reigning over the world and over our lives. Paul just wants us to feel the gospel in the depths of our hearts and to remember just how good the Lord Jesus Christ is. Why? Because Paul knows that the gospel and the gospel alone is what brings life where there is death. He knows that the gospel and the gospel alone is what brings 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.

And so in our passage today, Paul quite simply brings us back to the main thing, the transformative power of the gospel. And the way he brings us back to this main thing, the way he reminds us of matters of first importance is in three ways. He tells us in verses 1 and 2 why the gospel matters. Then in verses 3 to 8 what the gospel is.

And then in verses 9 to 11 how the gospel transforms. So friends, you ready? Why the gospel matters. Verses 1 and 2.

For Paul, the gospel matters because it is the beginning, middle, and end of the Christian life. There is no power of God for salvation at work in the world other than the gospel.

So verse 1. 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 : 25] Did you catch that? Paul used three different verbs to describe the relationship between the gospel and the Christian. Those three verbs are past, present, and ongoing. Which you received, a past action.

In which you stand, a past action with ongoing significance for the present. And by which you are being saved, a present action that continues into the future.

And do you notice the progression of the verbs? It's from something that we did, to something that is true of us, to something that is being done to us. And so Paul looks at the gospel and he says, this is a gift that you have received, but the gift that you received has actually become a power at work in your life, transforming you and saving you.

The Christian, according to the Apostle Paul, never outgrows the gospel of Jesus Christ and the basics of the gospel, because the Christian is by definition who they are in relation to the gospel.

As one of my favorite preachers put it, he said, growth in the Christian life is simply growth in seeing that the gospel is true. That Jesus Christ is the preeminent reality of all things.

[6 : 41] Growth in the Christian life is simply growth in coming to see that the gospel is true. And I think this explains a little bit of why Paul speaks at the end of verse 2, which is a little bit surprising, about the possibility of believing in vain.

Did you notice that language? In vain. Now, it's a word that on the one hand can mean careless or thoughtless. But on the other hand, it's a word that can mean fruitless or to no purpose.

So, for example, in verse 10, Paul uses the word again. And he uses it of himself. And he says, But by the grace of God, I am what I am. And his grace toward me was not in vain.

There, I think it means fruitless. It was not fruitless. And then again, in verse 14, he uses the exact same word. He says, And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain.

And your faith is in vain. Why? 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.

[7 : 48] And once again, we find the exact same word at the very end of the chapter. Verse 58, In other words, I think Paul is saying that if Christ was not raised from the dead, if he is not alive and active and ruling and reigning in the world and in our lives, then our faith in the gospel is ultimately fruitless and futile.

It is in vain. Everything according to Paul rests on the fact that the gospel is true. And growth in the Christian life is simply growing to see that the gospel is true.

The risen Christ is the preeminent reality of all things. And if it's not true, then Paul says we are the most to be pitied. And we have indeed believed in vain.

So, I think that's why, for Paul, the veracity of Paul's preaching and the fruitfulness of our believing are so closely wed together.

Does that make sense? And I think this is why, when he goes on to outline what the gospel is in verses 3 to 8, which we're going to turn to, it has a special focus on key historical events and the historical basis for believing that these events actually happened.

[9 : 27] The gospel is something that is received and delivered, something that actually happened, not something that was made up. And so, we see that Paul describes the gospel not as a social construct or a philosophical system or a political movement or an ethical ideal or a mystical experience or a religious sentiment, but it is a revelation and a gift with discernible content and discernible contours.

Or another way to put it, the gospel is tethered to a particular person and particular events revealed to particular persons in a particular order at particular times and places.

And notice Paul's description of it in verses 3 to 8. He uses four different verbs to highlight, take us to the heart of the gospel. And then the fourth verb he uses four times in a row.

So, obviously, he wants to emphasize that one. So, the four verbs at the heart of the gospel, verse 3, Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scripture. Verse 4, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scripture.

And then verse 5, that he appeared. And then that last verb he uses four times. In verse 5, he appeared to Cephas and the twelve. In verse 6, he appeared to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time.

[10 : 53] In verse 7, he appeared to James, probably the brother of Jesus, and all the apostles. And then verse 8, he appeared also to me, Paul. So, notice here, appear, appear, appear, appear.

The emphasis is on this widespread personal appearance of Jesus to public witnesses. The key leaders of the early church actually saw him.

Now, the Greek word behind the word appear is the word from which we get the English word, ophthalmology. Did I say that correctly? Ophthalmology? I hope so. I was practicing that one yesterday.

It's a mouthful. But it's the sense of visual. So, what Paul is talking about is not people who have just had a certain heightened religious or mystical experience. He's talking about people who have actually seen the Lord with their own eyes.

It's a word that has to do with what the eyes can see. And the purpose of this is Paul wants us to know, he wants the church to whom he is writing and speaking to know, that he got his gospel directly from the source itself.

[12 : 02] That the early church can confirm who the source is. They have seen the crucified and risen Christ. This is not stuff that they have made up. There are plenty of eyewitnesses' accounts who can back it up.

So, you see here that in Paul's description of the gospel, his main focus is incredibly historical and concrete. But why? The main focus is historical and concrete, but the main point is transformational.

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 preaching of the gospel of Christ is not shallow and hollow and in vain, but really has the power to transform people's lives.

And 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 is not futile or foolish or fruitless, but really will save us.

So, the fact that the gospel is true and the fact that we are staking our life on it is what leads to how the gospel transforms us. It's not just why it matters or what it is, it's the fact that this is the power of God to transform us.

[13 : 33] And here we see this in verses 9 to 11 and this is a really interesting place because throughout Paul's letter to the Corinthians and Paul's very interesting in this way, he shares his life as like an example or a parable of what it looks like when somebody completely bereft of the gospel is all of a sudden gripped by the gospel of grace.

And so, just a few examples, he talks in chapters 1 and 2 about how when he comes to people and he talks to them about Jesus and what Jesus did for them, he holds back doing it in words of eloquent wisdom and high-sounding rhetoric because he does not want people to come away impressed with his speaking skills.

He just wants people to come away in awe of who Jesus is and what he has done. That's somebody who's been gripped by the gospel of grace. And then in chapters 8 and 9, Paul says, look, I've got lots of knowledge, I know my rights, but I don't use my rights for my own gain and protection.

I'm willing to give up my rights if it means serving my brothers and sisters in Christ and pointing them to the Lord Jesus who willingly gave up his rights in order to serve others. And then in verse 14, when he's speaking of spiritual gifts, he says, look, I can speak in tongues and I can prophesy, but I would rather speak five words of clear prophecy with my mind than 10,000 words in tongues if it means that my brothers and sisters will be more built up and edified in the church.

These are ways in which throughout the letter, Paul holds up his own life as an example and a parable of what it looks like when somebody is gripped by the gospel of grace. And right here, we see Paul doing it again.

[15 : 17] He says, I was one who persecuted the church and now God has given me a ministry to the church as an apostle and he's given me a life that serves the church as a model of God's grace.

How can this be, Paul says. Three times, he uses the word grace in verse 10. It's by grace, it's toward grace, it's with grace.

God initiates and sustains and completes a total transformation of the human person, their nature, their identity, their purpose and their work.

Look at verse 9 with me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church. But, verse 10, 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, any of the other apostles, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

[16 : 27] Did you see that in verse 9? How Paul emphasizes his complete lack of qualification or merit or strength for the ministry that he has been given by God's grace.

He's totally unworthy of it. But then if you look back in verse 8, Paul goes even further than his unworthiness. He talks about his total helplessness and little trigger alert, this is graphic language here.

In verse 8, when he speaks of one who is untimely born, the Greek word actually speaks of a prematurely born baby or an aborted baby. So the image that Paul is using here is something incredibly graphic to describe not only his total unworthiness, but his total helplessness and vulnerability.

And that sets up the power of verse 10 in the most profound of ways because God's grace makes the most dramatic of reversals because God's kindness and mercy not only addresses Paul's unworthiness, notice by the grace of God, I am what I am, his sense of self and identity.

But God's kindness and mercy also addresses Paul's helplessness, his agency. Notice, God's grace works towards Paul to make him a new person, and then God's grace works with Paul, alongside Paul, to empower him in a new ministry and vocation and work.

[17 : 56] And so one of the things that we're seeing here is that the gospel does not make passive people. The gospel makes people who are active participants in the work of the Lord.

Do any of you know the author named Dallas Willard? He wrote a little book called Divine Conspiracy. He wrote a great book on gentleness. There's a lot of books he wrote. I was pastoring a church in Southern California where a lot of people actually knew Dallas Willard and were disciplined by him, and so I used to call him the patron saint of the church I was in before, just to jab people.

But Dallas Willard had this really perceptive thing in one of his books. He said this. He said, grace is not opposed to effort, but grace is opposed to earning.

Earning is an attitude towards God. Effort is an action birthed from God. And I think that's one of the reasons why Paul uses that verb earlier in chapter in verse 2, hold fast.

It's a very active word in relation to believing in the gospel. I think he's saying that holding fast is the type of activity that marks the Christian life.

[19 : 14] No matter what situation you find yourself in, whether it's a season of great depression or suffering, whether it's a season of waiting and discerning, whether it's a season of joy and working, holding fast is the type of activity that marks the Christian life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think Paul wants us to see that the gospel, as it is saving us, produces and sustains in us a desire and a capacity to hold fast to it.

I think Paul wants us to see that Christ, who is saving us, as he is saving us, produces and sustains in us a desire and a capacity to hold fast to him through the words that are spoken about him.

And so we get this vision of the Christian life as holding fast to the gospel that is saving us. We're holding fast to the Christ who is saving us. It's really interesting.

Jesus actually used this exact same verb, hold fast, in a really key place in Luke chapter 8 when he talked about the parable of the sower and the seed. Are you all familiar with that parable?

[20 : 25] He describes the kingdom of God like a farmer, a sower, who's going out throwing seed all over the place, the seeds of the gospel, the seed of the word of the God.

And how the kingdom of God grows and how people respond to it is like where the seed falls, whether it falls in good soil or rocky soil. And so Jesus says some seed falls on a path.

In other words, people hear the word of God, but just like the birds that come and snatch the seed off the path, the devil comes and snatches away the goodness of the gospel from people's hearts and they never get to the point of believing.

Then Jesus says some seed falls on rocks, rocky soil. So people hear the word of God and initially they receive it with joy. They start growing, but they have no deep roots because the soil is rocky.

And so when there's a time of trial and testing or suffering and temptation, they wither and they fall away. Jesus says some seed falls on thorns.

[21 : 30] People hear the word of God, but the journey of their faith slowly gets choked out like thorns around a bush by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life.

It's not that they ever decide I'm not going to follow Jesus anymore. They just slowly drift as they're lured away by these things. And then the very final thing that Jesus says, he said some seed does fall on good soil.

And what happens? He says upon hearing the good news of the gospel, people hold it fast. There's that same verb. In an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience.

So I think one of the questions that Paul is asking us here is he is bringing us back to the main thing, the heart of the Christian life, the heart of the church of Jesus Christ. He's saying if the gospel is really true, if growth in the Christian life is growth in seeing that the gospel is really true, then you are going to have to hold fast to the gospel in an active and constant and continuous way, whatever season or circumstance you find yourself in your life.

And so are you actively and deliberately holding fast to the Christ who is saving you? Or are you being complacent and passive and just drifting with the tide?

[22 : 56] See, I love this little passage because it takes all the complexity of our life and it doesn't deny any of it but it just brings us right crystal clear to the center of things.

These are matters of first importance. Why the gospel matters, what the gospel is, and how the gospel transforms. The fact that Jesus Christ is alive and active, he is our Lord and our Savior, our Alpha and our Omega, our Servant and our King.

It is something that means that believing in what Christ has done for us is more than enough for us and we can hold fast to him knowing that he holds fast to us. It's kind of like my son.

When my son is scared of heights or he's scared of something in a movie, he jumps into my arms and clings to me and says, Daddy, save me. Daddy, save me. Daddy, save me. And he's holding on to me, holding fast as much as he possibly can and I'm about three times as big as him.

So my arms are around him and I know that he's never going to drop. I'm never going to let him go. But he's still saying, Daddy, save me. Daddy, save me. And holding me. There's a sense in which for Paul, that is the Christian life beginning, middle, and end.

[24 : 10] We never outgrow just being a little child in the arms of the Almighty and Merciful Father. So my brothers and sisters, may the Lord establish you in his love.

May he keep you in his grace. And may you hold fast to him all your life. Knowing that your labors in the Lord are not in vain. I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. and HAN ■■■■T in the hand you and Carmela and William to ele ■■■■■■