

1 Corinthians 15:3-6 - The Main Thing

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- [0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- You may have heard of the late Stephen Covey. Covey was a really successful businessman, a big author, best-selling author, and a very well-respected guy in the self-help industry.
- He wrote books like *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*. That may ring a bell. It's been adapted for organizations, for schools, for individuals of all ages.
- Lots of wonderful advice in there. One of the things that Covey says in that book, one of his bits of wisdom, is the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.
- If you write it out, it looks like the mess at the top of your bulletin that doesn't look like a word. That's pretty good advice. Find out what's important, what your priorities are, and then make sure they're treated as priorities, like things that are really important, right?
- [1 : 1 1] It's a great bit of advice. The challenge with it, I find, is that figuring out what's important can be so difficult. There's just so much these days.
- Priorities are so hard. There's so much going on in my life. When I try to figure out, okay, let's just make a list. What are the important things I need to be doing? And marriage, and work, and kids, and church, and hobbies, and friendships, and volunteering.
- They all seem so important that they seem to crowd the list. And don't forget to sleep and exercise, because you should take care of yourself. That's important too, right? Culture tells us priorities should be things like comfort and ease.
- Fame, success, power, control. And we work really hard for those things. And then you're in a city like Huntsville with churches all over the place, right? And so you've heard messages from churches, from religious institutions, what they say should be really important.
- You've heard them say that the main thing is personal morality. Things you should not do, like don't smoke, or drink, or chew, or go with girls who do.
- [2 : 2 7] That's really important. Don't do those things. Or on the other hand, do some really important things, like go to church. Read your Bible, pray. You've heard that as something that is of utmost importance.
- From other churches, you may have heard messages more of social or corporate morality. Be pro-life. Be Republican.
- Be pro-Israel. Or on the other hand, perhaps be tolerant. Be inclusive. Be benevolent. Those are the most important things. So we've heard all sorts of messages about what's really important, about what the main thing is.
- So the main thing may well be to keep the main thing the main thing, but in the muddle of our lives and all those voices telling us what's so important, that may not actually help us a lot.
- It may not clear much up. What really matters for me, for my family, for all of life? And God's Word makes that clear for us in the passage we will read this morning.

[3 : 33] In no uncertain terms, the Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, tells us the message we should be hearing from churches as the main thing. We'll see, it's actually remarkably good news.

This is 1 Corinthians chapter 15. It's Paul's classic writing on the resurrection of Jesus. We're going to start reading at verse 3. This is God's Word.

In a world of promises that fail you, the thing you can count on. In a world where things fade, the thing that lasts.

In a world of imperfections, the perfect Word of God. Paul writes, For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Then He appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Will you pray with me? Father, thank You for these words, these words of life.

[4 : 56] Thank You that they're unlike any other that we hear today. We will hear in the next few minutes the words of a dying man, but we need to hear this morning the words of the living God.

We need to hear from You. And so, Father, would You speak to us clearly this morning? That's what would make a difference in our lives. We didn't come merely to be entertained.

We don't want simply to be happy for a few moments and then go about our way. We would ask that You would speak to us. That we would meet the living God and be different forever because of that.

Would You do that in this time that we have together? Speak through Your Word, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Okay, so what's the main thing?

What's the main thing here? One of the first things you notice when you read this passage, it says that there's something of first importance, right? Something that is the main thing Paul's going to remind the Corinthians is the essence of Christianity, the basis of life.

[6 : 08] The thing you notice is that it's about what God has done rather than what we do. Look at the passage. What's of first importance in this passage? That Christ died.

That He was buried. That He was raised. That He appeared. Over and over, this passage says what's most important, what's of first importance is Jesus' performance, not yours.

The whole list is His. Maybe you've missed that and what you've heard or perceived from churches before. Or we're often so loud on the messages of personal or social morality that I mentioned earlier that we muffle what God intended to be the clarion call of the church.

Christ has conquered. Christianity is about what He has done for you, not about what you do for Him. The main thing is not how well you've performed religious duties, how correctly you've voted, how successfully you've balanced a full plate of responsibilities.

The main thing is that Jesus has performed perfectly, that He has done everything that was necessary. So you can exhale for a minute this morning.

[7 : 29] Before we even dive into any details, that's the good news. He's carrying the load. What is it exactly that Jesus did that was so important?

What does this passage tell us? Paul summarizes it in these verses with two primary events. Two primary things Jesus did and they each have a special confirmation of their reality attached to them.

The first is Jesus' death. Look at verse 3. Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.

Jesus went to the cross. We've considered that this week. He suffered the pain and the agony there of a cruel death. The wrath of God being poured out on Him on the cross.

And why did He do it? Why does it say He died? It says, for our sins. You may notice this is actually the one time that our actions come into the of first importance list.

[8 : 36] Our sins. That's where we make it in. Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. There's a lot of Scriptures that talk about that.

One of the most beautiful places in the Old Testament where we read of Christ dying for our sins is Isaiah chapter 53. Let me read you just a portion of it. It says, Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with His wounds, we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to His own way.

And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Do you hear what's happening there in that passage? All our punishment laid on Him.

[9 : 37] Everything we deserved, He takes. You see, the amazing thing about those five little words, Christ died for our sins, is that died and sins go together.

You should often see them in the same sentence. That's exactly what has always been true of sin, that it deserved death. A holy God must punish sin.

The punishment for sin against a holy God is death. From the beginning it has been. Someone must die. The glory of these words, and you can see it, this is not complicated, is what we just read in Isaiah 53.

Everything we deserved, He takes. Christ died for our sins. That's the part that is not supposed to be that way. We should die for our sins, but Christ does instead.

Picture the judge coming out from behind His gavel, having cast the guilty verdict. And yet, before He reads the sentence, He steps out from behind the gavel and takes the place of the convict and says, I'll take the sentence that's due Him.

[10 : 50] That's what happens. The just judge says, sin deserves death. And then He says, but I'll be the one who takes it, not you. Amazing. Amazing that He would do that for our sins.

And Jesus really died. Really, truly died. The confirmation of that in this passage, of course, is His burial. Jesus' burial is mentioned.

Having been confirmed dead on the cross by Roman soldiers, He's placed in a tomb with a large stone in front and a Roman guard placed in front of it.

He didn't die figuratively. He really died, Paul is saying, and He was buried. And now we make it to Easter. I know, you're as anxious as I am.

Skip that part. It's Sunday morning. Come on. Let's get to verse 4. What happens next? Of course, it's Jesus' resurrection. Verse 4, after being in that tomb Friday night, all day Saturday, Sunday morning comes, the stone is rolled away, and Jesus walks out of the tomb.

[11 : 58] He is risen. And it's of first importance that this happened, Paul says. Why is it in the list? Why is it so important?

I think among other reasons, because many, many people in the history of the world have died and been buried. Many of them. There's lists and lists of those who have died and been buried in the history of mankind, but it's not at all common to talk about what happens when someone walks out of the tomb.

If Jesus remained in the grave, then He's just one more guy among a long, long list. One more person who succumbed to death in the end. He may have done some interesting things, but if that's the end of it, He's just like the rest of us.

There's no value to us in His death if that's the end. In fact, Paul will go on to say in this chapter that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we're still in our sins.

The claim that Jesus died for our sins that's so wonderful that we were just talking about, if He didn't rise from the dead, it's unhelpful. It's untrue.

[13 : 12] He didn't defeat sin, death, and the grave for us if that's the case. But if sin's just punishment, death can't hold Jesus, then He has conquered sin for us.

He's paid our full penalty. He's risen triumphant. And the Father says, yes, I accept that offering. Sin has been defeated. So the joy of the resurrection is that Jesus walked out of the grave in His glorious body, conquered sin, death, and the grave, that now death is being reversed and life brought in its place to those who deserved death.

There's hope for us again. Paul spends the rest of this chapter talking about how important the resurrection is, how it makes all the difference in the world if Jesus really did walk out of the tomb.

And He begins by giving confirmation to this historic event. He gives Jesus' appearances, some of them, listed in verses 5 and 6.

Paul gives names, eyewitnesses, numbers of people who witnessed the same encounter with a risen Jesus. And he makes the point of saying that most of them are still alive.

[14 : 28] Go talk to them, he's saying. Refute this incredible claim and shut this upstart movement down. Go talk to these people and see if they are just making this up, if they all have different stories.

Or join in with Jews, Romans. Pick anybody there who'd love to produce his body and end this crazy movement that's driving them mad. All those in power, when it stopped, go do that.

You can talk to them. Unless, of course, as you talk to one witness after another, you find it to be credible and true. Jesus' appearances are meant to confirm that He really rose from the dead.

Just like He really died, that He really rose from the dead, that that's the most important event in human history. But they're meant to do something else too, I think.

His appearances begin to confirm some of the personal impact of the resurrection. Look at the first name in the list. You may not recognize it.

[15 : 29] It says Cephas. It's a strange name. That's Peter. That's Peter, the one who denied Jesus three times. His disciple who, in his leader's greatest moment of need, in the big game, Peter lets him down.

Peter fails. Peter denies Jesus. And after His resurrection, Jesus' appearance to Peter is like many of His appearances to people.

He meets people right where they are. And the fact that He's risen changes everything. It changes everything for Peter. He's no longer defined as a failure, as one who's let Jesus down because when a risen Jesus walks out of the tomb, Jesus is one without Peter's help.

Peter may have failed in the big game, but Jesus conquered. He won. And so now, rather than being defined as a failure, He's reinstated as a friend and a leader, as one Jesus loves.

Jesus meets Thomas in his doubts and says, touch my hands and my side. See and believe. The resurrected Jesus changes everything for Thomas, doesn't He?

- [16 : 45] Jesus meets a woman named Mary in the garden just outside the tomb. She's fearful. She's grieving. She's uncertain about the future.
- Her Lord, the one she followed is gone. She doesn't know what's coming next. And Jesus calls her by name. He says, Mary. Mary.
- Don't be afraid. I'm alive. I'm here. The resurrected Jesus changes everything for Mary. I don't know what each of you is facing this morning.
- I'm sure that there are those here who are struggling with failures, ashamed of things you've done. Those who are struggling with doubts.
- Certainly, those struggling with fear and grief and uncertainty about the future. Probably many more emotions and situations in your life than that.
- [17 : 48] I couldn't possibly know them all. But I can tell you, the resurrected Jesus lives to meet you there. To call you by name.
- To remind you that because He lives, everything changes. You don't have to be afraid. He reigns over all and protects you.
- You can trust Him. You aren't defined by your mistakes. Even your bad ones. Even the ones you wouldn't admit to anybody this morning. He died for sins.
- Conquered sin. You're welcomed into His family whether you have a religious resume you're proud of or not. What He has done far outweighs what you do.
- See, the implications of the resurrection are intensely personal like that. Easter really does change everything. Easter cannot be merely a footnote.
- [18 : 47] It either changes everything or nothing at all. Claiming that someone died and then walked bodily out of the tomb is not just oh well that would be nice I wonder we ought to go think about that occasionally.
- It's not an event with a one day a year kind of impact. It can't fit that category. Either it is an absolute fairy tale that shouldn't matter at all or it changes every moment of every day.
- It's of first importance. That's what Paul means when he says these are matters of first importance. that it's a matter of life and death. Issues of eternal significance.
- Because Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. Amen? He has. Because that's true Easter changes everything for all of us. For all of us.
- Not just those who are considering Jesus for the first time. Not just the first moment we trust Jesus but every moment of every day for all of us.
- [19 : 48] the resurrection remains of prime importance. Paul says this in verse 1 before what we read. He says now I would remind you brothers of the gospel I preached to you.
- The gospel you received at first and also the gospel in which you now stand. The same one. That's how he sets up this list of first importance.
- The thing you first heard when I came to you that was so important I had to tell you and it hasn't changed. It's still what's so important. That's the gospel.
- The good news is what you receive and now stand in. It continues to shape every day. Easter speaks into every situation. So what does that look like Will?
- What do you mean Easter can't be a mere footnote but instead it changes everything? How is the gospel the good news of Jesus' life death and resurrection the most important reality in every moment?
- [20 : 51] What does that look like? I want to admit to you before I explain it that this passage was written pre-Iron Bowl. Okay and that is true and I know that's a really important event at least once a year but I also want to tell you I don't think God's unclear on what's most important.

I don't think it would change how Paul put the list together because it's not all the temporary passing priorities that we give our time and energy to that are of first importance is it?

They're just not there there's no room for them on the list and man I struggle with that because I honestly feel like my agenda is so important I love schedules and plans and the things I want to see happen and plus there are many days where you could look at my life and say I'm pretty sure if Clemson were to win the national championship and may it indeed happen one day that you'd look at my life and think that would be the best thing that could happen to him that would be the most important thing that would be the highlight of his year y'all even saying those words I feel the emptiness of it that that would be the best thing that could happen to me but there's a long list of things that I'd love to see happen that probably more quickly get on my list of what's most important but Jesus resurrection changes everything because it redefines what's really important doesn't it we don't have to wring everything out of this life anymore when his resurrection promises there's life beyond the grave when you go to work tomorrow morning the ultimate goal can't be it can't possibly be to make the most money or to accumulate the most toys when there are eternal riches offered to us by a risen savior it can't in your relationships this week the most important thing can't be your fame your recognition how well you fit in how many people like you or your Facebook picture if there is actually eternal life lasting success permanent acceptance offered to you by a risen savior it changes that the most important things remember are the things that he has done not things we do and that shakes me up because it challenges my natural feelings that on the list of most important things is being a perfect parent because man that seems important when you've got three little kids making the right decisions for where they'll go to school for figuring out how to discipline them that those many moments of many days feel like the most important things and listen

Easter the gospel being of first importance tells me my kids need not merely a good parent or a right set of rules but a righteous risen savior that's what they need this challenges my natural feelings that on the list of most important things is planning well for retirement managing my money well listen Easter the gospel being of first importance tells me that if my heavenly father was willing to give up his only son for me how will he not also along with him graciously give me everything I need he's got it what he has done is most important not how well I manage it it frees me up it does there's great freedom there Easter frees me up from the pressure of performance and record keeping with God to invest deeply in every aspect of creation and every person he puts in my path for me to love see it's not that my job or my family my finances don't matter anymore that's not the point it's that I can approach all of them differently now is now that Christ has taken care of what matters most it changes the way I approach those things because he has risen he's remaking all of his creation isn't he

Jesus is the first fruits and now he's remaking our bodies our relationships our neighborhoods hey outer space he cares about all of it and we get to participate in that every day what I do matters because it's not the most important thing it now has a place where it does matter my daughters have been trying to convince me this weekend that we should keep celebrating Easter this coming week I think it's not because they're so spiritual but because they really want to keep eating candy and playing all of the fun games together and I'm actually really okay with this idea honestly because the jelly beans that I put in the Easter eggs over the next few days will be ones I got on clearance and so it really it's a great idea I think to keep celebrating that that's something that they would be excited about and it's funny to consider and we probably will do some more

[26 : 16] Easter egg hunts through the week but ask yourself seriously does Easter change tomorrow for me is Easter going to make any difference the rest of this week is it going to matter in your life tomorrow morning when you wake up doesn't it have to if it matters at all if it matters at all in this moment enough to to come into a church building then it has to matter tomorrow morning we don't have time to tease out every situation of life and every occupation maybe you can do that in your small groups these Sunday school classes that are starting next week I'm so excited about because that's what they're going to do they're actually specifically designed to talk about that and what it looks like in your life but you get the joy the privilege of thinking about what Easter means where God has you in your life and I'll be honest it seems so much easier to me to think about waking up tomorrow and just carrying on with life the way I always have as though nothing has changed that that's where the momentum will carry me it doesn't seem like that'll take much effort but God says everything has changed someone has walked out of a tomb Jesus walks out of the tomb and says

I'm only the first fruits you too will live forever this creation is being remade so face your job your family your sin struggles your fear of death your hatred of brokenness and pain and the world around you all of that in light of my resurrection don't forget the main thing Easter changes everything and some of us really hate that about Easter and about Jesus it's one of the most common complaints about Christianity from people who don't believe in Jesus it's it's that frustration that Jesus messes with my life and tells me how everything in my life should be that's a huge complaint against Christianity and I'll be honest it's not entirely untrue but listen there's something that actually is really significant in that if you feel that way today or if you've ever felt that way before and that's this Jesus doesn't come to you telling you how to live your life he comes to you laying down his life for you and that's a huge difference he doesn't come and say the first thing I want to tell you is how to live your life this is the first thing I want to do for you is lay my life down for you that's where it starts that's the difference between good news and good advice the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing is is good advice but when the main thing is that someone else has done everything for you then it becomes good news that's a really significant difference because there's lots of good advice out there tips on how to handle stress how to find fulfillment in life how to find success but good news is something entirely different good advice by definition tells you something to do or to do better good news by definition tells you something that has already been done something that has already happened good advice is don't forget to take your medication good news is the surgery went well and you have a clear report good advice is hang on tight to that life preserver good news is I've jumped in I'm here to rescue you Buddha's dying words were keep on striving now I know most of you aren't Buddhist but I think that would work well as a slogan for our

American society wouldn't it just just try a little bit harder just put your mind to it learn more you can make it happen Jesus is dying words where it is finished it's the difference between your slogan being just do it and come to me like Jesus says I've done it it's finished come to me good news Jesus says you've messed up miserably you've failed but I've died for your sins and risen from the grave to offer you not a second chance to do it but to give you a new life the Bible doesn't say because Jesus rose we better start acting like it and do better it says because he rose we will rise to to new life the good news of the gospel there are a lot of places you can get good advice the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing is is really good advice I hope you haven't heard good advice this morning I'll be honest with you I'm just not that smart or helpful to dispense good advice Jesus offers you good news he says the main thing is I died for your sins was buried rose from the dead to conquer sin and death for you and appeared to many and my resurrection changes everything that's good news let's pray

Jesus could that could that really be true would the headline that we're reading this morning really say sins forgiven death defeated eternal hope daily purpose true freedom oh thank you thank you that Easter is good news that it's what you have done for us that we're not struggling to find our way out of the grave that you've walked out for us and now we will to forgive us father we we forget what is most important we regularly get confused would you change our hearts would you change our lives as we begin to consider this message would you change our neighborhoods and our our workplaces and and this city because you are alive and at work and that's what's most important oh Jesus that gives us great hope we don't feel like we could change even ourselves much less the world but if you're risen living Savior and King you can and you would with that great news give us great joy today and tomorrow would it inspire us to live as you've called us to oh Jesus change us change us may we never forget the good news of what you've done for us we ask in your name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org at southwood.org you you you you you you you