

Paul's Confession, Confidence and Commitment

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Preacher: Mr Iain Macritchie

[0 : 00] If we can turn back to God's Word now as we have it in 1 Corinthians in chapter 15.

And I'd like us to take for our text this evening the words that we find in verses 9 and 10. 1 Corinthians 15 verses 9 and 10.

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 towards 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.

By the grace of God I am what I am. Tonight we find ourselves here towards the end of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth.

[1 : 18] Now although he is here found writing this letter to this church, this was by no means his first meeting with the church.

You remember having previously endured beatings and having been mocked for the sake of Christ in Philippi and in Athens, he then left those places and travelled to Corinth.

When he came to Corinth, here he preached in the synagogues, Sabbath after Sabbath. And as he preached in the synagogues during this time, many of the people in Corinth came to know him as their saviour.

He stayed there for about 18 months until he moved on to Ephesus, leaving, or passing on, if you like, the baton to Apollos, who carried on preaching there.

And so as he left this church, he naturally would have thought that he was leaving them in quite good order, so to speak.

[2 : 21] They had been receiving good teaching from himself and Apollos, and so he would have naturally assumed that they were growing and making good progress in faith.

But yet we see here that this was so far from how things actually were. Because Paul, while in Ephesus, he receives a report that the church that he had been preaching to was, in fact, subject amongst other things to divisions, to adultery, to idolatry.

It was a church that was now needing guidance on marriage, on how to conduct yourself at the Lord's Supper. A church who was even needing to know a wee bit of decorum on how to worship God publicly.

And so it's to this landscape of a church in chaos, if you like, that Paul is here writing. And so in chapter 15, the chapter we have before us tonight, towards the end of the letter, we see Paul addressing an issue that he says in his own words in verse 3, was an issue which was of first importance.

An issue that was of first importance. He left this issue to last. No doubt it was an issue that he wanted to leave with the people, as this letter would have been read out in Corinth.

[3 : 59] What was the issue? Was it adultery or idolatry? No. The issue that he chose to leave to last, the issue that he saw of primary importance to the church in Corinth, as important as the other issues were, was the issue of the resurrection of the dead.

The reality that, in fact, on the last day, the dead would rise and be united with their soul.

Now, Paul was no stranger to this way of thinking. He was well aware of the fact that the Greeks had a sceptical attitude towards the resurrection of the dead.

In Acts 17.32, we read of the reaction of those in Athens when they heard Paul preach about this truth. Now, when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.

They made fun of him. The fact was that most Greek philosophers thought that the body was, in fact, a prison. It was something that we were to welcome getting rid of upon our death, that we really didn't want to have anything more to do with our body.

[5 : 18] And so the notion that body and soul would once again be reunited on the last day was seen as utterly ludicrous to them. To them, this was a backward step and nothing that would any way be desired or encouraged.

And so when Paul hears that this worldly thinking has somehow crept into the church along with all these other issues, he naturally puts pen to paper.

It's important to realise, though, that the people in Corinth, they weren't denying the resurrection of Christ himself. They believed in the resurrection of Christ himself.

We read that in verse 1 when we see Paul reminding the Corinthian church that he had previously preached this doctrine to them and that they had indeed received it.

In spite of this, in verse 12, we read that some of them said that there was no resurrection from the dead.

[6 : 26] And of course, believing, as we saw in the chapter there, believing in the resurrection of Christ, but not believing in the resurrection of the dead on the last day, had huge implications for the church here in Corinth.

And so effectively, they were being led astray by false doctrine. It was Charles Hodge who said, but if Christ be risen, then his people will also rise, because he rose as a pledge of their resurrection. He rose as a pledge of their resurrection. The fact is that Christ is the first fruits of the dead. We read in verses 22 and 23, For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive, but each in his own order.

Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. And so it was not just Christ who was to rise triumphant over the grave, but eventually the church, his bride, would also do the same.

And so for this church not to believe in this resurrection of the dead was for them to effectively not to believe in the power of the resurrection of Christ.

[7 : 55] A heresy that would completely undermine the whole of the gospel message. But as you sit here tonight, you may be saying to yourself, well, that's good and well, but where on earth does our text fit into all of this?

Why is it that in the midst of this important teaching that Paul seems to break through with verses 9 and 10?

You'll notice that these words follow directly on.

It's a good one from Paul's revelation to the church of Corinth in this letter that he had met himself with the resurrected Savior. And so it's as if Paul is here saying, Yes, I am writing to you as a church in order to highlight all the serious concerns I have for you.

All these errors that appear to be coming into the church. Yes, I'm concerned by your adultery, your idolatry, by your treating of the Lord's Supper.

[9 : 29] And yes, it may be that I have just met with the resurrected Savior himself. But I have not forgotten who it is I am myself.

I have not lost sight of the fact that I too am a sinner. I too am in constant need of the grace of God. And so he's showing here in these words that at first glance can appear almost random in this passage that he left to himself is in fact no better than they are.

And so friends, at the beginning of this communion weekend, I think it would be beneficial for us to look at these words together and for us to think about how they apply to us as the church of Christ. And so firstly, I'd like us to look at Paul's confession here when he says, I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle because I am persecuted of God.

[10 : 40] And then we'll look at Paul's confidence when he says, But by the grace of God, I am what I am. Followed lastly by Paul's commitment as seen in the words.

On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Confession, confidence and commitment.

Allow me to ask you, friends, as you sit here tonight, what view do you have of yourself? As you hear on a Thursday evening of the Communion.

If you're to ask yourself, what kind of person am I? What would the answer truly be? I think it's fair to say that Highland Christianity or Island Christianity, although I don't like that term, it's frequently had the charge against her of looking far too much at self.

Perhaps thinking just a little bit too much about her own sin. But yet here before us, we see the Apostle Paul himself with what some may think is a negative view of himself.

[12 : 09] A view that not only he holds to and keeps to himself, but also a view that he's willing to share with the whole church in Corinth. I am the least of the apostles.

I am unworthy to be called an apostle. But this was the Apostle Paul. And in our minds, if there was someone who was worthy to be called an apostle, it was most certainly Paul.

And not only that, he would have been the highest apostle. He wouldn't have been the least apostle. Here was a man who was truly not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A man who time and time again was so willing to put his life on the line for his saviour. But yet he was a man who was so bothered by sin.

He was so aware of how his wicked actions in his past life had had such a crippling effect on the church. He, in many ways, there had been no one like him.

[13 : 21] There had been no one with so much energy and zeal for persecuting the church of Christ like he had. And this bothered him.

But you know, it wasn't just the sins of his past that was bothering him. Because elsewhere we read it in Romans 7.19. For I do not do the good that I want.

This is Paul speaking. For I do not do the good that I want. But the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

He had an honest view of himself. He was not afraid to expose himself for what he was.

He was honest to himself. He was honest before God. He was even honest before the whole church of Corinth. He was so aware of his sin.

[14 : 19] Why was that? He was a man of God. How could he be so aware of such sin? Well friends, don't you think that it's because he was such a man of God that he was so aware of his sin?

When we see the sun shining through the window on a bright summer's day, we notice often marks on the glass that we never knew were there before.

We see the sun highlighting the dust on the windowsill that only the array of light would pick up. And you know friends, so it is with us.

So it was with Paul. The more that Christ shines into our heart, the more and more we're able to see our imperfections, the sins that are dwelling there.

And they bother us so much before a holy God. When I first started following, I used to wonder why old Christians, those who had been on the road for many, many, many years, godly men and women, why they appeared to be so bothered by their sin.

[15 : 40] Surely a Christian like them, they wouldn't be bothered by sin. They would be rid of sin by now. But the more I've gone on, I've realised what that is.

Because the closer they were walking with their Lord, just like Paul, the more they could see what they really were. But you know, we needn't look at this as a negative thing.

In fact, this is, in many ways, a good thing. It keeps us humble. Because here in this letter, Paul wasn't proudly looking down on the church in Corinth for all that was wrong with them.

But rather in love, he's directing them to the truth, in the full knowledge that his own heart was far from perfect.

And you know, friends, I think that's something we could all learn to remember as Christians.

Rather than scornfully pointing our fingers to those around us who perhaps have things that are wrong in their lives, why don't we rather lovingly point them to the freedom that is to be found in Christ?

[16 : 59] A freedom that, let's face it, at one time in our lives, we didn't know ourselves when we too were only living for this world. It's good for us to humbly remember, just like Paul, who we once were and what it is we were taken from.

You know, it's not only Paul that we read of in Scripture who had this sense of unworthiness before God. We see it with John the Baptist when he's speaking of Jesus.

He says, He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. And also with a centurion in Matthew 8.8, Lord, I'm not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed.

He didn't want Jesus to come into his home. And Peter in John 13.8, Peter said to him, that's Jesus, you shall never wash my feet.

Jesus answered, if I do not wash you, you have no share with me. And so I wonder, as you sit here tonight, do you, do I, do we have an awareness of our unworthiness before Christ?

[18 : 21] Are we aware of that, that corruption in our heart? Do the sins that you and I have committed, even today when we think back, do they really, truly bother you?

Perhaps you're even thinking that, that you are the least of the Christians in here, that you are unworthy to be called a Christian. You may be doubting whether you are a Christian at all. Well friends, surely, in one sense, that is a good sign, because, nobody in here, is worthy, to be a Christian. Nobody in here, is worthy of any good thing, from God.

And the fact is, that should we, or had we been left to ourselves, we would all, be worthy only of God's, wrath, and curse.

It would be quite depressing for us, if I closed the Bible just now, and left it there, and we all went home.

[19 : 30] But you know, we praise God, that there is a bigger picture, in scripture. We praise God, that, although we have verse 9 here, that we also have, verse 10, for I am the least, this is verse 9, for I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

And then verse 10, but, by the grace of God, I am, what I am. That brings us, to our second point, Paul's, confidence.

It was, John Newton, who said, I'm not, what I ought to be, I'm not, what I want to be, I'm not, what I hope to be, in another world.

But still, I'm not, what I used to be, and, by the grace of God, what I am, what I am. Paul knew, as well as John Newton did, that in spite of all of his sins, his past sins, his present sins, in spite of all his faults, and his failings, he wasn't what he once was.

There had been a change in his life. Yes, his sin greatly bothered him, and weighed him down, at times, no doubt, but that wasn't the end of the story.

[20 : 56] He wasn't left wallowing, and despairing, in a helpless pool, of self-pity. Why? Because of that one, beautiful word, grace.

Grace. It was Thomas Gillespie, who said, the covenant of grace, is the very hinge, upon which the whole business, of salvation, is turned about.

You see, everything hinges, on the grace of God. Yes, it's true, that our sin, has caused, a great gulf, between us, and God.

But this is a gulf, that can, be filled, tonight, by the grace, of God. Because grace, restores, that, union, between mankind, and his creator.

A union, that should never, have been broken, in the first place. Do we deserve it? No. Can we earn it?

[22 : 00] Absolutely not. Ephesians 2, 8, tells us, for by grace, you have been saved, through faith, and this is not, your own doing. It is a gift of God, not a result of work, so that no one, may boast.

It is a free, gift, of God. We are justified, freely, by his grace. It costs us, absolutely nothing, to receive it, because it has, already been purchased, for us, on that cross.

Friends, we, have been bought, for a price. That, is grace. And you know, just as the church, in Corinth, had to be reminded, of the resurrection, so too, do we, need to be reminded, time and time again, of just how amazing, grace is.

When was the last time, you or I, truly sat down, and meditated, in our heart, upon, this wonderful grace? It should never, ever cease, to amaze us.

I wonder, does it amaze you, tonight, as much as, it amazed you, the night you came, to know the Lord, for yourself? we will never, be able, to satisfy, the justice, of God, ourself.

[23 : 24] Paul knew, that he would never, satisfy, the justice, of God, himself. But you know, his confidence, it wasn't, on his own merit.

It wasn't, on all, that he could do. But rather, he clung, with all, his might, to the merit, that is to be found, in Jesus Christ, the one, who was rich, and became poor, so that through, his poverty, sinners, like you, and like I, that we, might be made, inheritors, of Christ's riches, all, at his expense, and what, riches, there are on offer, to us, tonight, in Christ.

It was Thomas Brooks, who said, grace is a ring, of pure gold, and Christ, is a sparkling, diamond, in that ring.

And so, to have, Christ, is to have grace, and to have grace, is to have Christ. I wonder, if you know, of that grace, tonight, in your heart. You may have, an awareness, of your own sin, in the same way, that Paul did, but do you, have that confidence?

Can you, truly say, but by the grace, of God, I am, what I am? You might, well be saying, yes, but, I am, so, so aware, of my sins, before God, and because of this, I, I really do not know, if I'm saved. [25 : 02] Well, allow me, to ask you, a further question, is this, the way, that you have, always been, looking back, over your life, have your, your desires, and your will, changed, ever so slightly, without perhaps, you, you even, realizing it, have you seen yourself, turning your back, to the things, of this world, and, and looking after, the things, of Christ?

Well, friends, if, if that is so, you take, encouragement, tonight, because, scripture, tells us, that the carnal mind, is enmity, towards God, or, in more modern language, the, the natural mind, hates, the things, of God, and so, if you have a desire, after the things, of God, if you seek, to live, for him, yes, you can, confess your sins, but perhaps, you may, even be able, to share, in that confidence, of Paul, and say, that by the grace, of God, I am, what I am, how does this grace, manifest itself, well that brings us, finally, and briefly, to our final point, commitment, we read, 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, the grace, of God, that is with me, his grace, toward me, was not in vain, Paul says, in other words, the grace, that Paul enjoyed, through faith, didn't lead him, to be a passive, Christian, a Christian, who was quite happy, to be born again, to receive, that saving grace, and then carry on, his life, as if nothing, had happened, yes, this was a gift, from God, absolutely, this was the most, precious gift, that Paul, could ever receive, but you know, in response, to this precious gift, what did Paul, want to do, he wanted to show, forth his, his love, and his gratitude, to the giver, of this gift, he wanted, to spend, and be spent, for the one, who died, and gave himself, for him, ought that not, to be our response, also tonight, should this grace, not, produce in us, an energetic, single, mindedness, towards Christ, and Christ alone, a willingness, for every square, inch of our life, to be lived, to the glory, of God, friends, we do not live, in an ideal world, and I know, that, there's many of you, sitting here, perhaps, as I often have myself, and you're saying to yourself, it's difficult, it's so difficult, to live for Christ, it's so difficult, for me, to live my life, in this way, with that zeal, for my God, when I live, in a world, that is so, so full, of temptation, a world, that every single day, is throwing me, this way, and that, a way, that, a world, that, at times, makes me lose, my boldness, for my Lord, so that,

I'm even ashamed, to tell those around me, that I am, a Christian, friends, I think sometimes, we are missing a trick, if you'll excuse the expression, because the fact is, that the more, we truly understand, understand grace, the more, that we, truly see, what, what God has done, for us in Christ, the more, that we, truly meditate, upon that, day, by day, isn't it so, that the more, willing, we will be, to, to truly, die to sin, and to, to live, to righteousness, that is a challenge, a challenge for you, and for me, but he doesn't expect us, to go it alone, yes, it's difficult, to, walk the life, of a Christian, at times, there is no doubt, about that, but we are not alone, Paul was a sinner, just like you and I, and the boldness, that he displayed, as a man of God, it, it didn't come, from himself, he tells us, in our text, on the contrary,

I worked harder, than any of them, he worked extra hard, though it was not I, but the grace, of God, that is with me, it's a Lord, that graciously, provided for Paul, and provides, indeed, for you and I, that, that sustaining grace, that, that strengthening grace, that grace, that he tells us, is sufficient, for us, not only sufficient, for us, but sufficient, for the church, in Corinth, sufficient, even for himself, if only, we, would avail, ourselves, of it, it's true, to say, that the grace, that we need, day by day, as it were, a stream, that comes, from the fountain, of Christ himself, we cannot make, this stream flow, we cannot make, the grace of God, flow, but, but we can position, ourselves, in a way, that, that we are ready, to receive it, as John Piper said, we can fight, to walk, in the paths, where he, has promised, his blessings, are we fighting, to walk, in these paths, where he has promised us, his blessings, how do we even, find ourselves, on these paths, well, to use, an old fashioned term, term, by, attending to, the means, of grace, those places, that, that God promises, to, to spiritually, feed us, the word of God, prayer, and the sacraments, grace, and so, as we find ourselves, coming, to a means, of grace, this, this very weekend, the sacrament, of the Lord's Supper, we do so, in the knowledge, that this, is for our good, and for his glory, it is a, strengthening, ordinance, we are, day by day, confessing, our sin, to him, we are, perhaps, even, day by day, putting our confidence, in his grace, but this weekend, we are committing, to him, by professing, by obeying, his command, to do this, in remembrance, of me, friends,

[32 : 45] I mentioned, in my prayer, this is not just, a memorial, for us to remember, that sacrificial, act of love, that is a wrong view, of the Lord's Supper, this is truly, a means of grace, a means of us, feeding us, the Lord's people, by faith, on the body, of Christ, Roderick Lawson, in the, shorter catechism, he writes, little comments, and, when he speaks, of the Lord's Supper, he says that, the Lord's Supper, in itself, is of no value, whatsoever, but when it is received, in faith, it quickens, our love, to God, it deepens, our faith, in Christ, and it promotes, the welfare, of our soul, doesn't that just, make you long, for the Lord's day, when you can partake, of these blessings, that are, so freely, offered to us, in the gospel, primarily, but in partaking, of the Lord's, supper, perhaps you're here, and you do, confess your sins, you've been, confessing your sins, daily, year, after year, after year, you do have, that confidence, in the grace, of God, he is, your all, in all, but yet, you still, haven't, committed, is that you,

I wonder, if I'm speaking, to anyone, in this church, tonight, to all intents, and purposes, you are, a Christian, but yet, you haven't, taken that, one step, well friends, if that is you, putting it bluntly, and I say this, out of love, not only, are you being, disobedient, but you are, missing out, on all, the many blessings, that are leaving you, weak, and unable, to fight, the good, fight of faith, as you ought, allow me, to come back, to the question, that I asked, at the beginning, what, is your view, of yourself, as you sit here, tonight, perhaps, you think, I'm not good enough, to come, and publicly, profess Christ, and neither, you are, but neither, are any of us, good enough, let me leave you, with the words, of two, poems, tonight, they're long poems, but I'll read you, a few verses, from each, one is by,

John Newton, and one, is a response, to that poem, by Daniel Herbert, tis a point, I long to know, oft it causes, anxious thought, do I love, the Lord, or no, am I his, or am I not, when I turn, my eyes, within, all is dark, and vain, and wild, filled, with unbelief, and sin, can I deem, myself a child, and then the last verse, says this, let me love thee, more and more, if I love, at all, I pray, if I have not, loved before, help me, to begin today, and then there, is a response, what is the point, you long to know, methinks, I hear you say, it's this, I want to know, I'm born of God, an heir of everlasting bliss, I want to know, that Christ died, for me, I want to feel, the zeal within,

I want to know, Christ's precious blood, was shed away, was shed, to wash away, my sin, I want to feel, more love, to Christ, I want more liberty, and prayer, but when I look, within my heart, it almost drives, me to despair, I want more faith, a stronger faith, I want to feel, its power within, I want to feel, more love to God, I want to feel, less love to sin, and the last verse, however small, thy grace appears, there's plenty, in thy living head, these wants, you feel, my Christian friend, were never found, amongst the dead, confession, confidence, commitment, as we leave here tonight, at the beginning, of these communions, let us leave here, laying hold, of all three, as Paul did, not because we are worthy, because he is worthy, he is worthy, not only of all my friends, but of our life, will you give it to him, amen, and we pray, that the Lord would bless, these few thoughts to us, and to his name, be all the praise, we can, we can, conclude now, by singing to God's praise, from, Psalm 84, Psalm 84, in the Scottish Psalter, you'll find that, on page, 339, and we can, sing, verses 7 to 12, so they, from strength, unwearied, go, still forward unto strength, until in Zion, they appear, before, the Lord, at length, we can sing, verses 7 to 12, to God's praise, verse 7 to 12, verse 7 to 12, and we can sing, verse 7 to 12, verse 7 to 12, verse 7 to 12, verse 7 to 12, verse 7 to 12, verse 8 to 12, verse 8 to 12, so they, from strength, the need, it go, still forward, and to strength, until inside, you may appear, before the Lord, at length,

[39 : 14] Lord God, of us, my prayer, here, O Jacob's, God, will, our Lord, see God, our shield, look on the pain, of thine, blinded, here, O do I, courts, one day, extends, a thousand, robberin, my God's house, will I, keep adored, more than dwelling, in tents of sin, for God, the Lord's, our sun and shield, field, here, grace and glory, give, and will, withhold, no good, from them, that upright, bright, little,

O the bad, dark, and Lord, of wolves, that man is truly blessed, here, by assured confidence, on the ground of rest.

I'll go to the main door after a short word of prayer. Let us pray. Lord, our God, our heavenly Father, we bless and we thank thee, this night, for the hope that is to be found in thee.

And we pray that as we depart one from another, that thy word would not depart from us, but rather that we would be found meditating upon it, and that it would do us good.

Go with us now, we ask, and forgive us for all our many sins, and all we ask, we ask in the precious name of Christ, and for his sake. Amen.