

Only One Thing Necessary // 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

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[0:00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! 1 Corinthians chapter 2, this is God's Word. And I, Paul says, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.

And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please be seated. Can you get my water?

[1:11] In his opening chapter of *The Cross-Centered Life*, C.J. Mahaney illustrates what it could have been like for Timothy to receive the Apostle Paul's last letter just before Paul's death.

C.J. writes in his book. Timothy's hands trembled as he read. He almost cradled the letter. For years, Timothy had pushed back the thought of losing Paul out of his mind.

Paul had been like a father, a friend, and a mentor. But Timothy knew that Paul's death was imminent. Paul had written, The time has come for my departure.

He read the closing lines of the letter through tears. And he stopped and pushed them away abruptly. How could he wallow in grief when his old friend faced death so boldly?

Then Timothy began to read the letter again. He read slowly, deliberately. In the closing moments of Paul's life, would God give him a flash of insight that he'd pass on to Timothy?

[2:20] As Timothy read, heart pounding, the truth, the key, hit him with piercing clarity. He saw more clearly than ever what Paul had given his life to, and for which Timothy, too, would spend himself.

The message of Paul's final letter revealed no new truth, no hidden knowledge, just one truth he had given his life to spread.

Paul said, Of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. And he said, Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you.

And he went on. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. This is my gospel. Paul was saying to Timothy, You don't need a new truth.

You need to keep one truth. The good news. The news of the cross. That message, that Jesus Christ died for sinners, is the centerpiece of the Bible.

[3:30] And it's the centerpiece of all of human history as well. It's God's wonderful plan of salvation. And yet, too many of us have moved on from that glorious plan.

That was Paul's message to Timothy. It was Paul's message to the Corinthian church. And it's God's message to all of us.

So I think our main point today is, Never forget. The cross of Christ is the single truth on which we are to build our lives, and the only hope to change our hearts.

Well, there is so much to learn about God and his word. And as Walt said earlier, It's not only about the cross. There's so much.

It's inexhaustible. God's word's inexhaustible. And in this life, we'll never come to the end of growing in Christ. And in the next life, we'll spend all eternity getting to know God better.

[4:30] But the message of our lives must be founded, rooted on one single truth. Everything else flows from there.

Everything else flows from there. And so may we rediscover the truth that first saved us. And may we never forget, the cross of Christ is the single truth on which we are to build our lives, and the

only hope to change our hearts.

I'm going to break this into three points. They're not of equal length. But point number one, the simplicity of the gospel. The simplicity of the gospel.

First impressions can be important. We usually like to make good first impressions. That's why we, when we go out, we put on our best outfits. Get a haircut. Fix up nice.

Put on makeup. Maybe put more wax in the beard. We want to make a good first impression. Well, Paul was concerned about first impressions too. He's carrying on the conversation that he began many verses ago, thinking about the cross-centered life.

[5:38] And now he gets personal. He remembers the first impression he was making. He says, When I came to you. He's reflecting on that time when he first came to Corinth.

And I love that it said, just as a, just casually put, When I came to you. He's not sitting in ivory towers writing letters to churches or to people.

He's with people. He loves people. He's with them. And so Paul comes to this very large metropolis of Corinth. It's, it was likely much bigger than most cities he had been to.

And what does he see? He sees pomp and pageantry. And when, what Paul saw in Athens and especially in Corinth was the dominant presence of sophist teachers.

These sophists, these teachers who were sophists. Now, sophia is the Greek word for wisdom. And so these sophists were wisdom teachers. They were professional, itinerant teachers who went around and specialized teaching in one particular discipline.

[6:48] Like philosophy or music, math or law. They were skilled. But part of their appeal was not what they were saying, but how they said it.

They were entertaining to hear. They spoke eloquently. So some wealthy aristocrat may go here. A teacher speak about mathematics.

Not because they were interested in math necessarily. But because the speaking was so good. It was theatrics. In many ways, these professional speakers were more concerned with winning an argument and the art of persuasion than leading the hearers to the truth.

And so it's really difficult for us to underestimate the heavy value that this culture placed on rhetoric.

Good public speakers were praised, famous, paid well.

Good public speakers were praised, famous, paid well. Poor public speakers were probably ridiculed. They couldn't meet the high standards. They were seriously inferior. And so in Paul's day, to say something well was to say it truthfully.

[7:57] Even if the content contained errors or untruths. And so Paul is aghast at that situation. Like, he absolutely refuses to let the gospel get mixed up in this worldly system.

He's no celebrity pastor trying to gain a following. He wants to preserve the purity and the simple truth of the work of God. And so Paul made a choice, a decision to come to them in a certain way. And so Paul begins his comments in the negative. He did not come in the way in which the crowds expected, with lofty speech or literally high words.

The specialized orders were skilled, but they added things to it. They added high words to their speaking. It was no longer just about the message. But Paul was giving no lecture about religion.

This is the testimony of God. This is God's word he's handling. That's what he says. I did not come proclaiming to you.

[9:08] Look down there, verse 1. The testimony of God. He's handling the word of God, not the wisdom of men.

So Paul refuses to add anything to the simple message of the gospel to try to make it more palatable. What can we add to the gospel to make it better?

A friend once told me, you can't make the gospel better. It's glorious. We can only make it clearer.

So really, anything we add to the gospel will dilute it, change it.

And so Paul recognizes his role here as a herald, a faithful messenger of the good news. And this is how we, too, want to approach our preaching and our message and our Sunday services.

It's important to ask, how can we be faithful? How can we be faithful pastors? How can we be a faithful church? How can we be faithful in evangelism?

[10:16] And for the most part, the answer is fairly simple. We should use our gifts and our skills not to impress, but to make the gospel clear.

As clear as we can. We're heralds of the good news with our words and our lives. So, man, the gospel, the beauty of the gospel is in its simplicity.

Christ died for my sins. Children can understand the gospel. Praise the Lord.

So simple, clear, plain preaching, declaring the word of God is powerful. So our prayer is that you never walk away from hearing the preaching in this church thinking, what a great job the pastor did. We want you to be amazed by the Savior. What a glorious Savior I have. That's our prayer. And don't get me wrong, we have a very encouraging church.

[11:19] I'm so glad for the encouragement you give us. But, man, we want you to be moved by the power of the cross, not eloquent words. I was saved when I was around 25 years old.

And I never had the thought of becoming a pastor. Mainly because I was convinced I didn't have the personality for it. Pastors, so I thought, looked a certain way, talked a certain way, dressed a certain way.

I thought a good preacher of the word was someone who was able to turn a phrase, has witty illustrations, and is persuasive in their speech. In other words, I had a lot of misconceptions about what a pastor is.

I had to learn in a positive way what it was as well. But once I corrected misunderstandings, I realized I did desire to serve the church in pastoral ministry. And it has been a privilege, an honor. Now, does this mean that simple preaching is always best? Or that God opposes clever wording?

[12:29] Or that the Lord is somehow against intelligence? No. Paul himself is the author of some of the most beautiful texts in all of Scripture. And he had just been to Athens, where he gives a brilliant speech.

And I guarantee that if anyone could convince a crowd with the power of persuasion, Paul could. He was a brilliant scholar. Some of the pagans in one town called him Hermes, the god of communication.

So if he was only after decisions for Christ, they could have turned the lights down low, let the keyboard pad play, let Luke do his thing in the background, and let Paul at him for an hour.

He could have gotten decisions for Christ. But he's not just looking for the method that's most effective, but the most faithful. He didn't want to cause the Corinthians to get hung up on the wrong thing.

And neither do we. And most weeks, I love that we meet in a gymnasium. Most weeks. There's no beautiful aesthetics.

[13:35] The sound quality isn't the best. But let me say that our sound guys do a wonderful job of making the best of a terrible acoustic room. They do a great job.

We don't have stained glass windows here. Or high vaulted ceilings. Well, we have high ceilings. They're not vaulted. Or beautiful stonework.

I love these things. But the Holy Spirit doesn't need them to be present with us. We are interested in having our own building and pursuing it.

And I hope we get all of these beautiful elements. But those things never caused us to think that we need them for God to stick around. We want to preserve the beauty and the simplicity of the cross. Now, in verse 3, Paul switches from the negative. I did not come. To the positive. He did not come in the way that they were expecting.

[14:34] But he was with them in weakness and fear and in much trembling. Paul is on what we call his second missionary journey.

Although he probably would have no idea what we were talking about. He had seen his share of ups and downs. Folks coming to Christ. But it seems he couldn't stay in one place for very long. Because they'd run him out of town or he'd be severely beaten. He came to Corinth directly from Athens. It appeared that there wasn't a lot of fruit there.

Paul's partners, Silas and Timothy, weren't with him when he came to Corinth. They joined him later. And so when Paul arrives to town, he's no doubt exhausted.

Perhaps discouraged. And fear and trembling is not his way of being modest. He was beaten with rods. Sometime before, he was almost stoned to death.

[15:29] You think that's not going to leave a mark? Yes. He's scarred. He may walk with a limp. Paul was also concerned about his personal safety. He feels inadequacy.

Possibly overwhelmed and alone without his friends. But more importantly, Paul is in fear and trembling before the Lord. He trembles before the Lord.

Paul's humbled again and again by his own weakness. And by God's power. Paul faced unbelievable rejection.

And he witnessed miraculous conversions. And he recognized his own need. He positioned himself as one trembling before the power and majesty of God.

Even as he feels his weakness. So does our weakness cause us to tremble before God or man? When we feel our weakness.

[16:29] Are we scared to let other people know when we're sick or hurting? Do we fear what other people think of us when we are weak?

For most of us, we love to serve others. We also have a serving church. We love to serve. But when we're the ones who suddenly need to be the one to be served, it's hard.

It's humbling. And sometimes I don't want to let people in. We don't want to let people in. But more and more, I want to embrace my weakness as a way of showing dependence upon God and others. And I know the older I get, for those of us who are over 40, the older we get, the more we feel our weakness, don't we? Moses, though, was slow of speech.

Jeremiah didn't know how to speak well. God regularly chooses to work through human weakness. Physical strength has a way of deceiving us.

[17:34] But God works through weakness. He helps us to see our need, our true state. We can't do the same things we used to. And so when we feel weak, it's those times that God draws us to himself to help us to see who we really are.

We've been weak all along. Apart from me, you could do nothing. And he often gives us a newfound love for the cross of Christ in that moment. Grateful for salvation.

Eager for eternity. So are you past your prime? Struck with grief? Or physical pain? Chronic illness? That doesn't seem to have any kind of reprieve? It's not letting up? It's these kinds of weaknesses that tend to eclipse the grace of God.

They weigh on us. And it feels like, at times, that our limitations can hinder the work of God. And too often, I know it feels like nobody sees or nobody understands our weakness.

[18:43] And just as Paul's suffering caused him to tremble before God, go again to the fountain of grace.

Tremble before the presence of the Lord with awe, before the majesty of our God. He knows your weakness. And it's not an obstacle for you.

It's not an obstacle for God to meet you. Weakness is no obstacle. And neither was Paul ashamed of his weakness. So we must learn, as Paul did, that God is on display in our weakness.

His power is made perfect in your weakness. Amen. Do not despair. Jesus came in weakness as well. We don't have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness.

But in every way, he's been tempted as we are, yet without sin. He's able to sympathize with us. Hold tight to the simple gospel. And know that weakness is no obstacle in our lives.

[19:46] Point two, the centrality of the gospel. The centrality of the gospel. Not only is the simplest truth the easiest to forget, the most important truth is the easiest to forget.

Let's look down there at verse two. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul was like a guitar that's missing all of its strings except for one. And all of its frets except for one. And he's just hammering that note over and over and over.

And it's enough. It's enough to make beautiful music. Paul didn't want to talk about anything else when he was with them. Jesus Christ and him crucified.

And it's not that the Corinthian church only needed the cross of Christ. And he wrote several letters to them that contained so much content. But before Paul moves into anything about addressing wisdom, unity, purity, lawsuits, marriage and divorce, food, sacrifice to idol, there's so much he covers.

[21:09] Before he does any of that, he wants to make sure that everything is rooted in the gospel. The cross of Christ is the main thing they need. And it's the main thing that we need.

It's the most important thing. It colors all of life and all of ministry. What do we say? When we say we're gospel-centered, what do we mean by that?

Paul lived a cross-centered life. It's the same kind of thing. What does that mean? It's really because he never forgot that he was shown mercy.

That's what it means. He never forgot. 1 Timothy 1.13, Paul wrote to Timothy. He says, Paul says these kinds of things over and over.

Why? Because he never wants to forget. He never wants to put it out of his mind, the mercy that he was shown in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ died for his sins and it affected his daily life.

[22 : 17] And it should do the same for us. It should be what we think about, inform whatever troubles we go through. All should be colored by the fact that we were at one time enemies with God.

But he showed us mercy. We've got to hold these two things in tandem. We need the gospel to remain the single focus of our lives because we're so prone to think that we're okay.

Blessed is the man whose transgressions are forgiven, Psalm 32. The cross is maximized in our lives when we realize what it is.

What is the cross to us? Well, first, it's an indictment. It's accusing us. The cross is an indictment to us. Apart from Christ, we are condemned.

Is our sin really that bad? The cross says yes. Jesus didn't die for sins in a general way or in a cumulative way.

[23 : 17] Well, it's like that. There's just so many sins in the world. I guess I'm just going to have to die and make a new slate. No, he died specifically for your specific sins and mine.

Each one. The wages of sin is death. Do you know that every hour of our lives we deserve the righteous wrath of God?

God is the holy, glorious, mighty king of all.

He's the almighty. We're his creatures. And yet sometimes we think that he owes us something. He owes us punishment. And yet the free gift of God is eternal life.

Thank God. The cross is not only an indictment. It's also a death sentence. We must come low and ultimately die to ourselves.

[24 : 23] Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me, Jesus said. We put to death our self-will and sinful desires. And crucifixion is a strange way of talking about discipleship.

It's strange, but it's true. We have to die. Because of the cross, God is free to give us grace, to save us from his wrath.

And he's able to give us grace every day of our lives after that. And may we hold these two extreme views in our hands, our deep, immense sinfulness and rebellion against God.

Every one of us. There are no good people, ultimately. And God's supreme glory and majesty. These two things are outrageously incompatible.

But God's mercy extends to us through Jesus Christ. That's how wonderful it is. So, if you're a Christian, are you still amazed that God saved you?

[25 : 30] That you received mercy? Are you still amazed? I want to be amazed every day of my life. God's mercy, astounded. If not, the Lord wants to help you.

Ask him to help you see the cross of Christ as glorious every day. We should be confounded.

Befuddled. Surprised that God would make a way for anyone at all to be saved.

How in the world could he provide a way? It's perplexing. God owes us nothing. Why would he save anyone? For his glory. For his glory.

And so, this message is the main thing we need. When I became a Christian, I really did not understand the gospel well.

I knew I was a sinner. And I knew I needed God. Two very key ingredients. But nobody really preached the gospel to me. And thankfully, God saved me without a deep understanding of knowing what it meant that Christ died for my sins.

[26 : 43] What does that mean? I didn't know what that meant. But as I began my Christian walk, my deficiency came out. And it began to become a problem. When I became more and more aware of my sin, I was troubled.

I felt guilty. I knew I could repent and go to God, but I didn't know what was happening. I thought I need to go get saved again. I genuinely thought I wasn't a Christian anymore.

How could a Christian sin this bad? But I didn't realize that something happened on the cross when Jesus died. I didn't know that God the Father was pouring out his wrath, the wrath that I deserved, on his son.

I didn't realize that there was a transfer happening. In a moment of time, God was gathering up the consequences and punishment for sin for all of his children from all of time and gathering them up.

And like a laser beam, unloading it onto Jesus on the cross over the course of a few hours in a moment of time. Unloading it, this wrath while he was on the cross.

[27 : 53] Our sins were being atoned for in that moment. Jesus is my substitute. Is he yours? One of my favorite songs that we sing here on Sundays says it well.

It's called His Forever. It says this. Jesus, friend of sinners, a crown of thorns you wore for me. Bruised for my transgressions.

Pierced for my iniquity. The wrath of God that I deserved was poured out on the innocent. Capital I. He's the innocent one.

It took my place, my soul to save. Now, I am his forever. Amen. I didn't know the security that that brings.

I didn't know that God had already forgiven me. I didn't know I had a firm salvation. I didn't know that God's grace wasn't based on my performance.

[28 : 57] Oh, how that truth eventually changed my life and gave me a desire to live for him even more. But now that I do know. But now that I do know, I never want to forget it.

in his book disciplines of grace jerry bridges called this scenario that i just explained good day bad day scenario i think during that time in my life if you had asked me what is it what does a person have to do to be saved i probably would have said nothing it's a gift of god repent and believe and trust in jesus but i was relating to god in a way on the basis of my works some good days some bad days so what do you do when you have a bad day spiritually when everything's going wrong you're feeling guilty maybe you missed devotions this morning yelled at the kids at breakfast kick the dog on the way out the door you feel like god isn't going to come through for you that day or maybe you feel like you need to keep a safe distance until he's not mad at you anymore where's his grace in that moment or what makes a good day spiritually you get up early meet god in his word unloaded the dishwasher so someone else wouldn't have to and feeling generous you picked up coffee for a co-worker on your way out and then you sense that god is answering your prayers he's for you why because you earned his favor what's happening in these moments i think walt alluded to it earlier we're relating to god on the basis of our works our performance but the cross says we're always in need of grace even on our best days and so jerry bridges in his book sums it up like this so helpful your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of god's grace and your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of god's grace oh man take a picture of that one put that on your computer screen that will preach to you every day i find it so helpful i know too often i'm looking at how i feel about myself and how i'm doing and not focused enough on god's gift of grace every day of our christian lives should be lived primarily relating to him on the basis of his grace grace alone and so is the cross of christ enough is it enough for you do you want to add works to it oh we have to work all right but not for our salvation not to receive grace do we want to add to it it's no longer free when we add to it it's the one thing that must remain central in the 1990s movie city slickers there's a classic scene where a cowboy and a new yorker are riding down the trail having a conversation and they stop together and the cowboy says do you know what the secret of life is the city slicker says no what is this what's your finger no one thing just one thing you stick to that everything else don't mean nothing so that's great but what's the one thing well you're gonna have to figure that out for yourself i think what he's getting at is that only one thing can be in first place in our lives only one thing can be in first or as theologian bob dylan said you're gonna have to serve somebody or more helpfully as our lord and savior said the eye is the lamp of the body so if your eye is healthy your whole body will be filled full of light whatever you focus on whatever you see whatever you

give your attention to that's gonna fill your whole life jesus goes on to say you can't serve two masters so what's the singular focus of your life everything should be colored by jesus christ and what he has done for you on the cross everything so in paul's letters he's regularly tying ethics to the cross and one of the reasons is because he knows there's danger of laying it aside and when that happens when we begin to lay it aside it becomes assumed and when the gospel becomes assumed it's easily forgotten and because so many other things are vying for our attention and take greater and greater importance when it's easily forgotten it's ultimately rejected and when we focus so much on peripheral issues when the gospel of christ is no longer taking the seat of prominence that it deserves then we are one step away from rejecting the gospel a few years ago i had the privilege to attend a worship leader training intensive with 15 other guys from around the country and the instructor had us go around the room and each of the guys had about five to seven minutes

to share their testimony how they came to know the lord it took about an hour and a half for all of us to share and it was great and then the instructor asked us okay which one of us in their in your testimony in sharing sharing your your story which one of us actually shared the gospel we thought back yeah of course we did i i did you did but upon closer inspection we shared the effects of the gospel we shared what we were like before we came to christ but no one not one of us actually shared the good news of the gospel it was all assumed it was nobody was talking about jesus christ dying for our sins nobody mentioned being rescued from god's wrath it was a gentle correction for us and the instructor said we should never let the gospel be assumed especially when sharing our testimony jesus christ died for our sins it should not be assumed or lay aside or forgotten it must remain central primary in our lives and so it's important to say briefly that as pastors of this church it's one thing that we want to commit and walt said it last week but i want to reiterate it's one thing that we want to commit to never forget and lay aside it's one thing that we want to keep of first importance before your eyes regularly jesus christ and him crucified it's central point three the power of the gospel the power of the gospel the corinthians were looking for a demonstration of these rhetorical gifts great speaking they wanted to be entertained alongside a convincing message but paul's convincing proof was not in himself like so many of the great speakers around him the proof was in god's work look down there in the second half of verse 4 it says but in demonstration of the spirit and of power and then look again at the end of verse 5 it says in the power of god what are we to conclude about about those two phrases some of us may think miracles signs and wonders

are we to conclude that his message at that time was accompanied by those things miracles even though that often does seem to be the case when paul's journeying and all through the book of acts i don't think we should conclude that that's what's going on here that it's a demonstration of signs and wonders in many ways this is the very thing that paul's pushing against he's preaching the weakness of the cross jews demand signs greeks seek wisdom but paul preaches christ crucified weakness it'd be a little odd then if the message were accompanied by impressive works or if paul's now saying check out these signs and wonders to a people who want to be entertained to point to miracles as the demonstration of god's power would be in many ways an undoing of what he just said or what if we were to speak the same message that paul spoke and it wasn't accompanied by signs and wonders would we say that god's power isn't there or that it's not true that there's something deficient no many people in the new testament saw signs and wonders and yet still rejected christ and it's not that miracles are wrong the lord gave these wonderful gifts to paul and he still gives them to the church of christ it's just that signs and wonders are pale in comparison to the glory of the cross and the transformative power of the cross has in our lives the power of the cross is on display in their own changed lives that's the power god changed their lives the demonstration is them he changed their hearts he gave them new life that's an amazing thing paul's drawn out that you're the changed life that's the demonstration paul said something similar similar in first the Thessalonians 1 he says our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the holy spirit and with full conviction with full conviction i think that's what he's saying and so it is for us it's not by sophisticated language that you came to believe or merely by some wonderful miracle that happened it's by believing in jesus christ and him crucified that you came to believe and your life was changed the witness is right here among you your own faith and the changed life that it generates is the proof of god's power amen if jesus christ died for your sins then the biggest problem in your life is taken care of amen or as forrest gump would say it's good one less thing but it's the main thing we're saved by grace alone and every day after that we want to live by grace alone as well and so if you have never trusted in jesus christ to forgive you of your sins i encourage you don't wait another moment plead for the lord to save you god changes our hearts when we encounter christ and him crucified the forgiveness of sins that christ offers and i offer it to you today his grace is deep and wide just like the kids song deep and wide it's enough to forgive you there are no sins too complex too deep too strong to be broken his love and mercy are deep and wide and may we return regularly to the cross of christ and the suffering of christ and may we look at the cross and say it's enough the gospel is simple it must remain central and it is the power of god to change our hearts never forget the cross of christ is the single truth on which we are to build our lives and the only hope to change our hearts let's pray

oh lord lord of heaven and earth we thank you thank you that you have given us grace in jesus christ thank you that we are not our own we were bought with a price and that you have looked at our sin and you have allowed the wrath that sin deserves to be placed on christ on the cross and

that his death and resurrection is proof that the payment was enough and that you rule in heaven and we will someday be with you god i pray more and more we would trust and we would believe this simple message and it would remain primary oh lord help us now with our lives and our message to walk this out and live by grace alone we pray these things in christ's name amen you've been listening to a message at a sunday celebration at trinity grace church in athens for more information about trinity grace please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com athens athens
[42 : 26] Thank you.