

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, we're looking at 1 Corinthians chapter 15 this morning. And as I was thinking about this passage this week, I was reminded of an experience we had in the youth ministry a few years ago.

So every fall, we plan a fall retreat. And instead of going to one of these retreat centers that sort of does it all for you, we, for some strange reason, decide to just pull one off ourselves.

So we plan all the music and all the food and all the games and all the talks. And we basically just go to a place that will give us a warm place to sleep at night and a nice clean open area where we can do all that crazy stuff.

And this one year, we were packing up all of our things. And we were doing a really good job as a leadership team of making good lists of everything we had to bring. So, you know, we had our sound system, the portable sound system, check.

We had the instruments check. We had the mic cables check and the microphones check and the stands check. We even brought the projector and the screen and the music sheets and everything. We had it all set up.

[1 : 08] And then one of our youth leaders said, Hey, where's the power cable to the projector? We forgot this one thing, this one little element.

And pretty much everything that we hoped to do during our kind of gathered worship times on the retreat was totally foiled because we didn't bring this one little thing.

Everything else, it seemed, was in vain because we were missing the power cable. Well, thankfully we, I forget what we ended up doing. I'll have to talk to Andrew afterward how we actually solved that problem.

I think we might have borrowed a projector from the camp or something like that. But maybe you've had a similar sort of experience or you can think of a similar example in your own life. You know, that time you tried driving your car just a little bit further even though the fuel light was on only to find that you ran out of gas.

And now every time you pushed the pedal, it was nothing but doing it in vain. Or maybe that time you were almost done with the recipe. You had everything you needed, but then you discovered you were out of eggs.

[2 : 14] And it was all in vain. Well, friends, I've been thinking about this text this morning. I've been wondering, and I think this text causes us to ask, what if the same thing could be true in our spiritual lives?

Is there something without which, if this one thing is missing, then the whole thing is in vain? Is there such an essential ingredient to Christianity, to true spirituality?

And if there is something like that, do you know what it is? And do you know whether you have it? Well, as I said, I think that's what our text today is all about.

The one thing that everything hangs on. The one essential thing that you have to have spiritually. Or else everything else is in vain.

Looking at 1 Corinthians chapter 15. If you want to turn there in the Pew Bible, the page number is in your bulletin. We're going to look at verses 12 through 19.

[3 : 30] Let me read this for us. Now, if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain.

We are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise, if it is true that the dead are not raised.

For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. Let's pray together as we consider this text.

[4 : 38] Our Father, we ask that your Holy Spirit would help us to understand with our minds and grasp with our hearts the truth of this passage and the way in which it reveals, Lord, critical, essential things for our life in you.

God, we ask that you would soften our hearts and open our ears to hear, Lord Jesus, what you would have us to hear today.

In your name we pray. Amen. Well, so it seems from this paragraph, and as you look at the whole of 1 Corinthians 15, as we started last week, it seems that some of the Corinthians were having a hard time believing in what Paul calls the resurrection of the dead.

Or sometimes we say the resurrection of the body, which is sort of the same way of saying the same thing. Paul asks in verse 12, do you notice there, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

Some of the members of this church who believed the gospel were then turning around and saying, I don't think there is anything like the resurrection of the dead. Now, what does that mean?

[6 : 01] I think it's safe to say that these Corinthian Christians had no problem probably believing in what we might call the immortality of the soul. Corinth, after all, was a Greek city steeped in Greek thinking and belief in an immortal soul was in the water all around them.

That's not what they had trouble grasping. What they had a much harder time wrapping their minds around was this incredible biblical promise that we see echoed in the Psalms and in the prophets. This incredible biblical promise that God will raise us to bodily life on the last day. That our ultimate future state in God's new creation is a physical bodily one.

In Acts 17, Paul is preaching there in Athens, just down the road from Corinth. And as he's presenting the gospel, he comes to the resurrection part.

And at that moment, Luke, the author of Acts, says, a good number in the crowd just outright mocked him when they heard him talk of the resurrection of the dead.

[7 : 12] So in the first century, culturally, this was a hard idea to accept. In fact, virtually none, I would imagine, of the Corinthians' pagan friends and neighbors would have believed in the resurrection of the body.

Which, if I were to take a poll, is probably exactly like us today in the 21st century. Today, we can spend all sorts of time thinking up how we might survive a potential zombie apocalypse.

For instance, if there were an onslaught of the undead, we have lots of bumper stickers and video games and blogs to sort of playfully think about how we might deal with that reality.

But we'll never for a moment think about the possibility of the resurrection of the dead. The resurrection of the body. It seems like it's something that's just completely off the radar for us.

But what we see here, in this whole chapter actually, is that this is not an area for Christians to be fuzzy about. Paul is going to use some sort of relentless logic in our little paragraph here to get us to think clearly here.

[8 : 43] Because as he says in verse 13, if there's no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ hasn't been raised, friends, well, that has simply massive implications.

And there are at least two. And we see them both listed at the end of verse 14. And let's take some time meditating on both of these things together this morning.

First, without the resurrection of Jesus, Paul says, our preaching is in vain. Now, in the first 11 verses of our chapter, Paul has been showing how the death and resurrection of Jesus are central components of the gospel.

Look again at verses 3 through 5. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received. This is the message, the apostolic message that has been preached and handed down in these early decades of the church.

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, that's Peter, then to the twelve, and then on to many others.

[9 : 59] So on the one hand, we have Christ's death and burial, the burial proving that he actually died. And on the other hand, we have Christ's resurrection and the appearances, the appearances proving that he actually had been raised.

And now here in verse 14, Paul is saying essentially, look, if you take away half of the gospel message, if you take away the resurrection of Jesus, if you deny the resurrection of the dead, if you take away half of the gospel, friends, you have no gospel at all.

A half gospel is no gospel. Our preaching in that case would be utterly in vain. It would be empty. It would be ineffectual. It would get nothing done. Just think for a moment. Let's pause on this fact that Paul is pointing us towards here.

What would Christian preaching be without the resurrection of Jesus? Friends, I think the reality is that we wouldn't have much to say.

[11 : 09] Perhaps we could look to Jesus as a good moral teacher. One who believed in his ideals so strongly that he was willing to die for them. A good moral teacher. But then, wouldn't Christian preaching just end up being more or less moral instruction?

Jesus was a very good man who taught very good things, so we ought to now follow his example and try to do these good things as well today. Full stop.

But friends, realize that Jesus' moral instruction was actually not radically that different than what the Old Testament had been teaching for thousands of years.

Yes, Jesus took the Old Testament seriously in all its implications. He was willing to take it all the way down to the heart level and say things like, you've heard it said, do not murder. My battery's died right in the middle of my point.

Look at that. Jonathan, can I just use the pulpit mic? Okay, that means I can't sway back and forth.

All right. Jesus would say things like, you've heard it said, don't murder.

[12 : 20] And then how does the rest of that passage go? I say, even anger in your heart amounts to the same thing. So there's Jesus not teaching something different than the Old Testament, but taking the Old Testament seriously in all of its heart level implications.

Exactly how the prophets before him had done. But he wasn't offering anything that was radically new. Do you remember the rich young man who comes up to Jesus and says, good teacher, what must I do to be saved?

This young guy apparently had heard rumors about Jesus. Jesus was growing in popularity, so he comes thinking, what new innovative thing could this rising star teacher Jesus tell me about gaining eternal life?

And what does Jesus say to this eager young man thinking he's going to get something new? Jesus says, you know the commandments. Do not murder.

Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother. Do not steal. Do not steal. Do not steal. Basically, he starts listing the ten commandments.

[13 : 29] So the point is, if we're looking to Jesus merely as a great moral teacher, we basically find what all the other great moral teachers have propounded.

And so if our preaching, then, is just the ethics, the morality of Jesus, then I would submit that we really aren't preaching anything worthwhile at all.

You can find it anywhere else. We don't have anything to say that's worth saying. Now, perhaps your experience of Christian teaching and preaching hasn't amounted to much more than what feels like lots of moral instruction.

Maybe when you think of Christianity, you think of basically just a call, a sort of exhortation to live a better life. But again, let me suggest to you, friend, that that isn't real Christianity at all.

Yes, Christianity presents a vision of life that is good and beautiful and compelling. But that's not the only thing and that's not the central thing.

[14 : 43] And if all you've heard is good moral teaching in the name of Christianity, then, friend, you've heard only a hollow version of the real thing. Because the real thing isn't a long list of things to do, but a great thing that God has done.

Our preaching is vain without the resurrection. But Paul goes on to say that our preaching is not just empty, it's not just vain, but it's actually also a bit dishonest if Christ has not been raised.

Look again at verse 15. We're even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

Now, the language Paul is using here is language of the law court. When we hear the word testify or testimony in a church setting, don't we often think of someone sharing a personal experience of something that God has done in their life?

And that's a good thing. We want to hear lots of that at Trinity. Come on down. But, when Paul is using the language of testimony here, we need to imagine not the church gathering, but the courtroom in session.

[16:05] there is the judge, there is the jury, and the witnesses are brought to the stand to give their testimony so that a verdict might be made.

Paul and the other apostles were witnesses in that sense, witnesses of an event. They saw something happen in history. Just like if you walked outside today and witnessed a car accident, you would be a witness.

Perhaps you would be summoned to give a testimony in court about what you saw. The apostles saw the risen Lord Jesus. He appeared to them, spent time with them, ate with them, taught them. Back in chapter 9, Paul writes, am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus, our Lord? Seeing the resurrected Jesus was the critical thing that made an apostle an apostle.

The apostles could testify in a courtroom before the bar that they had met the risen Jesus, that God had raised him from the dead. In Acts chapter 2, at the climax of his great sermon at Pentecost, Peter sums it up this way, this Jesus, God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses.

[17:29] And so you see, if Christ then hasn't been raised, if there's no such thing as the resurrection of the dead, then the apostles are all false witnesses.

That's what the word misrepresented literally means here. A pseudo witness. In other words, they're all committing perjury.

But not just perjury. Because they're being false witnesses of God, then they're knowingly committing blasphemy. Telling the world lies about who God is and what he's done.

Without the resurrection, our preaching is in vain. So think of all the sermons that have been preached throughout the ages by the great role of Christian preachers, the Chrysostoms and the Luthers and the Whitfields and the Wesleys and the Spurgeons.

And then think of all the great written works of Christian life and thought that have been penned by the Augustans and the Aquinas' and the Calvins and the Edwards. And then consider all the missionaries who've traveled across the world to herald the risen Christ, the William Careys and the Hudson Taylors and the Lottie Moons and the Amy Carmichael's.

[19:00] All of that preaching by countless men and women throughout Christian history, all of it was in vain without the resurrection of Jesus.

Nothing but empty, even dishonest words. And so you see, friends, the resurrection of Jesus is essential.

Essential to our preaching. Without it, we really have nothing to say. Christianity would be just another moral code, nothing more. And even worse, without the resurrection, what we are saying would be nothing but a false testimony about God.

But that's not all. Not only is our preaching in vain, Paul here keeps driving the logic further to its uncomfortable logic conclusion.

without the resurrection of Jesus, he says, not just our preaching is in vain, but your faith is in vain. And in verses 17 and 18, Paul teases this out.

[20:12] There we find two reasons why that's the case. Why is our faith in vain? First, if Christ has not been raised, Paul says, very categorically, you are still in your sins. You know, we often don't think about the resurrection as being essential to the forgiveness of sins, do we?

Perhaps, rightfully so, our minds go more naturally to the cross. After all, Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures as we just read in verse 3. But Paul is telling us here that Christ's resurrection is no less essential.

On the one hand, the resurrection proves that the one who did die on that cross was not a mere teacher or even prophet, but the king of glory. But more than that, the fact that Christ was raised on the third day, friends, is the great sign that he had paid our debt of sin in full.

The raising of Jesus, the raising of Christ was God the Father's approval. It was his perfect verdict that the work of Jesus was complete, that the sacrifice was totally sufficient, that the penalty was paid once and for all.

Think of it, when a prisoner, when a criminal does his full sentence, when he or she undergoes the months or even the years that their crime deserved in prison, in a cell, whatever.

[21 : 54] And then, their sentence is served when they've completed their time. What do they do? They leave the cell. They walk out of the prison.

They go out into the light of day. With that penalty no longer hanging over them, they go out free because it's been paid in full.

They've done it. And what was the sentence that hung over us for breaking God's law? Again and again, the Bible is clear on this point that the wages of sin is death.

God warned Adam and Eve from the very start that if they rebelled against his word and chose to be their own gods and their own rulers and they ate the fruit from the tree that they would die.

And each one of us from that day on, having fallen into sin, having chosen our own way apart from God, faces that same penalty of death.

[23 : 05] God So you see, when Christ died for our sins, he was paying that judicial penalty that our sins deserved.

But of course, he wasn't paying for his own sins. Christ had no sins. There was no sentence hanging over his head. No, when Jesus died for our sins, he was acting as our substitute.

The death he died, the penalty of sin he paid was for us in our place. But you know, if Christ had stayed in the grave, had he not been raised, it would be as if he were still paying the debt.

As if there were still something left of the sentence that needed to be served. That something about the cross wasn't quite enough.

And so, we would still be in our sins. That's the first reason our faith is in vain without the resurrection.

[24 : 28] We're still in our sins. The penalty hasn't fully been paid. The second reason is in verse 18.

If Christ has not been raised, then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished, Paul says. Those Christians who have gone before us, those who have died in the faith, they are lost if Christ has not been raised.

I mean, again, think about it. Logically, if the Lord in whom they put their trust was not strong enough to save himself from death, how could he save others?

How could he save them? when I'm looking for financial advice, I don't go to folks who are repeatedly claiming bankruptcy.

No, I go to those who know how to walk that path, who have the wisdom and the strength to be able to see me through. And friends, the reality is if our faith can't help us in the face of death, then quite honestly, what good is it?

[26 : 02] Of course, there are always, and perhaps always will be, a handful of scholars and pastors who will try to make Christianity meaningful without the bodily resurrection. No longer convinced that God raised Jesus from the dead or that God could do something like resurrection.

These scholars and pastors try to salvage some kind of meaningful faith. One way they do this is kind of what we've already seen. They try to emphasize the moral principles of Jesus.

That is, if we strip away those things that we just can't believe in anymore, then surely we still have a meaningful moral framework in which to live our lives, don't we? Isn't that enough? Isn't that what really matters? But you know, show me friends, show me someone who is genuinely trying to actually live up to the way of Jesus, to his commands, and I will show you someone who knows that they need more than a moral framework, that they need forgiveness.

If Christianity needs nothing more than a set of rules to follow, rules that Jesus embodied, then anyone with half an ounce of self-awareness knows that they fall short over and over and over again.

But Jesus taught the way of love and forgiveness, they say. Yes, indeed he did, and it's a beautiful thing. But to be blunt, how are you doing with forgiving others these days?

[27 : 34] Yes. Yes. have you really let go of that hurt and bitterness? Have you really stopped playing that video over and over in your mind, the one where you finally tell them off and give them what they deserve?

Have you really taken steps down the hard road of reconciliation with them? If we're serious about following Jesus' commands, friends, then we need to know not just what he commands, but we need to know that our sins can be taken care of.

Because the more we follow Jesus' commands, the more we'll see how far we fall short and that we need someone to save us. So that moralistic kind of resurrectionless Christianity is certainly a dead end, but there's another way some will try to make it work.

Jesus' resurrection, they'll say, wasn't a bodily event, no, but it points us to a spiritual truth, a spiritual reality. Jesus' spirit is with the Father, that's what it means, and his spirit is with us, something like that.

But you know, this attempt to make a meaningful Christianity without the resurrection fails as well. Why? Because isn't it clear, friends, that in this version, death still wins.

[29 : 10] You see, friends, God created our world in all of its material, physical reality. He created it in that way and called it good.

We were meant to live lives bodily, physically, that are free from decay and pain and disease. But when sin entered, death entered, and along with it, suffering and pain and decay and disease. And so, you see, to say that God's redeeming work, to say that the resurrection will only involve some kind of spiritual salvation, is to say that God is unable or at least unwilling to actually go the whole way and fully redeem his fallen creation.

It's to say that God is willing to let death win. That he's willing to let sin and death colonize and corrupt his good creation forever.

It is to say that God will turn his back on his good creation and just move on. God is to know that's not how the story goes.

[30 : 21] That's not what God has revealed to us about his saving purposes. The resurrection of Jesus, you see, isn't some supernatural magic trick in the middle of history to shock and awe.

the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of God's plan for the whole universe. It's a foretaste of what's to come.

God will renew his creation. He will remove death and sickness and sin.

He will heal and redeem and recover what's broken, not abandon it. Creation is going to be regained and repaired and even transfigured so that it's endlessly, stoplessly good again.

the resurrection body of Jesus is the pledge that God will not let death win and that one day through Jesus all creation will participate in that great renewal that's begun in him.

[31 : 37] So you see, even that spiritual version of resurrectionless Christianity isn't much worth believing in. It's a bit better than the moralistic version, I'll give you that, but it's still pretty hollow because it's still a faith that can't actually rescue us.

You see, if the moralistic version can't deal with our sin and our guilt, this spiritualistic version can't deal with the reality of our physical death and decay. It might offer escape, but it doesn't offer redemption.

salvation. And so Paul says in verse 19, if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we're of all people most to be pitied.

If those who believe in Christ perish upon death, if Christianity is nothing but a good way to live in the here and now, then Paul says we're the most pitiable people the world has ever seen.

Not just because we've been deluded and believed a lie, but also because we've suffered hardship in the faith for nothing. We'll see that a little later in chapter 15. Because we've denied earthly pleasures in the faith for nothing.

[32 : 50] We'll also see that. And perhaps we've even missed out on finding something or someone else that could have rescued us instead. Without the resurrection, our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain.

And so, friends, as we draw these verses together, we see that Christianity without the resurrection is indeed empty. It's an empty message producing an empty faith. In other words, Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the resurrection.

Everything rides on this. And that's a stark claim. If you've been exploring Christianity or you're just starting to learn about it, this might make Christianity seem pretty unattractive to you, even.

I mean, if it all hangs on this one thing, I mean, what if that one thing isn't actually true? If a resurrectionless Christianity ends up being futile, why even consider it?

It seems like a pretty risky gamble to take. why not just stay where you are? Why risk jumping into something that could end up, without the resurrection, being totally in vain?

[34 : 18] Well, I wonder if you'd be willing to think of it this way. It is true that a resurrectionless Christianity is empty. but friend, is your resurrectionless worldview truly any better?

If you think hard about it, isn't your resurrectionless belief not also, at the end of the day, a vain thing? What does it really offer you for your greatest needs?

Maybe some morals, but nothing to deal with your guilt. Maybe some spirituality even, but nothing that really deals with death.

If there's no resurrection, yes, Christianity is empty. It doesn't get you much farther than your own beliefs where you are right now. But what if it's true?

What if the claim Christianity offers, the claim of resurrection, that claim that's not really on offer anywhere else, what if that claim is true? How would you know if it's true?

[35 : 47] How would you find out? what if it's true? What if it's true? What if it's true? Well, friend, you'd look at the evidence. Paul's been urging us through this whole paragraph to use our brains and to think, think about the logic, think about the implications.

And you know, we can do the same thing with the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. After all, how do you explain historically the beginning of the Christian movement? Have you thought about that?

Around 30 AD, a young Jewish rabbi was crucified by the Romans under charges of treason, just like a lot of other young Jewish rabbis have been crucified around 30 AD for charges of treason under the Romans.

It was sort of what they did. But why within months of this particular gruesome death was there a growing movement of devout Jewish men and women claiming that this crucified rabbi was now Israel's Messiah, their king?

That is very strange, you have to admit. And why do these men and women keep on making this claim, even though they face increasing persecution and death for making it?

[36 : 55] And why, if the religious authorities are so offended by this movement, why don't they just go to the gravesite, unearth the body, and end the controversy once and for all? And why is the language that we find in the earliest Christian documents not language about how this once crucified king, this teacher they loved, was now merely spiritually present to God and to their hearts?

No. Why do they consistently the whole way down, as far as you can go in the historical record, why do they say that God raised him bodily from the dead, even when they knew, just like us, that dead bodies stay dead?

And even though they had no prior expectation that God would do anything like that. Friends, have you considered seriously the evidence?

It's worth the time to think it through. Because if Christianity without the resurrection is to be pitied, and I grant you that, isn't Christianity with the resurrection something to be envied?

Think of the preaching. Here is a message of what God has done in history, so powerful, so new, so life-changing, that the only word they could think of to put on it was the gospel, the good news.

[38 : 24] A message like nothing else on offer. A message of a God who came in his own person and lived and died for us to redeem his fallen creation and bring it back from exile home to himself.

And not just the preaching, think of the faith. Here is actually the forgiveness of sins. Have you ever had one of those dreams at the end of a semester?

You just finished all your exams, you're just done, you're at your first day of summer vacation, and you're sleeping soundly, and what do you dream of? You still have a paper to write.

You still have an exam that needs to be written. You're not done. And all night you're just aching, and it nags at you, and it claws at your mind.

But then you wake up, and it's summer. Friends, isn't our sin the same way? That ache that follows you around, that soul sickness that never seems to go away, that something still needs to be done, that something still needs to be paid, that something still needs to be put right.

[39 : 45] Friends, here's the remedy that you can wake up. You can awaken to new spiritual life, and your conscience can be cleansed, and your heart can be put right with your creator.

Because Jesus died, and he rose again to prove that it's all been paid for you. And not just the forgiveness of sins, but even the defeat of death.

Notice how tightly our passage has tied together the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. It almost seems poor writing.

Again and again, Paul says it, verse 12, verse 13, verse 15, verse 16, if there's no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And you know, Paul isn't just making a logical point

here, but more, he's making a theological point.

Actually, to be more precise, he's making a Christological point. He's pointing to the fact that what God has done in Jesus, he will surely do for all who are united to him in faith.

[40 : 58] What's true of one must be true of the other. So deeply so that if there's no resurrection for those who are in Christ, then not even Christ has been raised. Just as God broke the bars of death for his own son, so he will break the bars of death for all who trust in his son.

God's not going to let death have the final words. And those who die in Christ will rise with him when God makes all things new. Friends, the resurrection is essential.

It is the key ingredient. Without it, everything is in vain. And yes, we are most to be pitied, but with it, with it, it's all that your heart has been looking for.

How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? Christ has been raised. And we will be with him.

Let's pray. Lord, we ask one thing this morning. That the reality of the resurrection, that its essential nature, that its greatness and its goodness would be impressed upon our hearts.

[42 : 33] Lord, if there are any here who are seeking you and unsure about religious things, would you open their minds to at least explore this reality, to give it a chance?

For those of us who are believers in you, help this truth to sink more deeply into our hearts and produce love and hope and joy. And help us, Father, as a community, to be a people of the resurrection, to hold fast to our hope, and to be confident to the end.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.