

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

A Gospel-Centered Church (1 Corinthians 15:1-11)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 8, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ **The greatest danger to a church's gospel witness is usually not what's explicitly taught on Sunday mornings or in midweek gatherings.** When you look at churches that have abandoned the gospel, it's not as if heresy was introduced to the congregation and everyone was suddenly led astray. That's not how it happens.
 - Most churches are resilient enough to resist heretical teaching. The danger is typically not found in what is explicitly taught. **The danger is found in what is implicitly assumed.** Churches find themselves in trouble when they don't have a pattern or priority of regularly proclaiming the gospel message to their people. Because it's assumed that most people already know it.

- ❖ **In other words, the church that is most at risk of abandoning the gospel is the church that has formed a habit of assuming the gospel.** Assuming that the gospel is primarily a message for seekers to hear. That it has to do with the basics that you need to believe in order to become a Christian. But once you've received it, then you can move on to meatier topics, to deeper truths. This is why, in such churches, the gospel is rarely proclaimed in their preaching and teaching. It's usually reserved for a special evangelistic service or a specific seeker Sunday School class or small group. Now it's still a church that believes the gospel. **No one is denying the gospel. But everyone is assuming it.**
 - And that's a dangerous position to be in. **Because you're just one generation removed from confusing the gospel to outright abandoning it.** That's the sad story of many historic churches and denominations in our country. One generation proclaimed the gospel. The next assumed the gospel. Resulting in the next generation confusing the gospel. And the generation after that abandoning the gospel altogether.

- ❖ Friends, this pattern of church decline and gospel abandonment stretches back all the way to the first-century. The church in Corinth faced this danger. In chapter 15, Paul addresses some bad theology in the church. Some false teaching related to the Christian's future hope. But he begins chapter 15 with an explicit proclamation of the gospel. He wants to forefront the very message they had been assuming. That they had left in the background. Listen to v1, "*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you.*"
 - And that's what we find in vv1-11. **This morning's passage is a faithful account of the gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected.** Paul felt compelled to explicitly lay out the facts of the gospel because it had gone assumed for far too long. Because they weren't regularly talking about the resurrection of Christ and meditating on its implications, that explains why they're now willing to entertain some bad theology. **We're told that some in the church were denying a future bodily resurrection.** They were confusing the gospel. And if they don't recover it and begin to faithfully proclaim it, then they risk abandoning the gospel altogether.
 - That's what's at stake. As much for the church in Corinth as for us. That's why I want to focus on the gospel. Making it explicit – as Paul does in our text. We're going to consider three aspects of the gospel: (1) The nature of the gospel, (2) The heart of the gospel, and (3) The grace of the gospel.

The Nature of the Gospel

- ❖ We begin by considering the nature of the gospel. I have four observations to make that come from vv1-2. Let's read it again, "*1Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*"
- ❖ Note how **(1) the gospel is good news to be preached**. That's what the word gospel means in the original Greek. It literally means "good news". Now think about what we're implying when we call the gospel "news". When you pick up the newspaper what do you expect to read? You expect to read about events that have already taken place. It could've been the day before or it could've occurred weeks ago. **Either way, news is about past events that have some significance for the present**. Otherwise it wouldn't be newsworthy.
 - That's why it's a mistake when people treat the gospel like it's good advice. When someone offers you good advice, the assumption is that you can do it. You can fulfill that advice. You just needed someone to point you in the right direction. It's a lot like reading the self-help column in a newspaper.
- ❖ But that's not gospel. That's not actually news. News is about past events that have present-day significance. And when it comes to the Christian gospel – **we're talking about the good news of what the Son of God accomplished in the past to redeem sinners like us from the present effects of sin and its future consequences**.
 - Friends, I'd argue that this is how Christianity stands out among all other world religions and every other worldview that essentially centers on self-help – on how to improve your life or to become a better version of yourself. **Christianity is about proclaiming good news. Every other worldview just offers good advice.**
- ❖ Think about this term for *preaching* in vv1-2 and how it would've been used in a first-century context. It's the verb form of the same word for gospel. Paul is literally saying I want to remind you of the gospel that I *gospelled* to you. **Preaching is about gospelling – announcing good news**.
 - In Paul's day, the typical use of that term would've been a military herald being sent back to the capital city with a good report. **These heralds were gospellers sent to announce good news that the battle is won**. That victory is yours. So be filled with peace and joy and live in light of this good news!
 - But if there is no victory – if the battle drags on, if the outcome looks bad – instead of sending a herald with news, they'll send back a military advisor with advice on how to survive. "Get out of the city. Save yourself. Or sharpen your sword and prepare to fight for yourself." You'll get advice; not news.
- ❖ **My point is that there's a big difference between good news and good advice**. And what makes the Christian faith a gospel faith is that we have good news to preach about a victory (a salvation) that has already been accomplished for you. It's not about helping yourself or saving yourself. It's about hearing and responding to this good news.

- ❖ So the gospel is good news to be preached. Here's a second observation, **(2) the gospel is an apostolic tradition to be received.** This has to do with the faithful preservation of this gospel message. Notice how Paul says I'm here to remind you of the gospel that I gossiped to you, "*which you received.*" The Greek word there is a technical term referring to the reception of a tradition handed down to you. It's the same word he uses in v3 – meaning he passed on to them the same body of teaching that he himself had received.
 - **The point here is that we're not at liberty to tweak or change the message.** Our job is to receive the message and then turnaround to preach the same message. We're called to take what we have heard and entrust it to faithful believers who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:1). We're supposed to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 1:3).

- ❖ An ancient herald is like a modern-day spokesperson or press secretary. The president's press secretary isn't given a word-for-word script from the president that she just reads aloud. No, she has freedom to use her own words and expressions. As long as she's faithfully proclaiming the message or agenda she received. She doesn't have the freedom to adjust that.
 - The same goes for us. **Every Christian is an ambassador for Christ entrusted with his message of reconciliation** (2 Cor 5:19-20). Your choice of words or expressions or overall presentation may sound different than mine. There's liberty there. But we don't have the liberty to change the underlying gospel message.
 - Now to be fair, at this point the Corinthians had not abandoned the apostolic tradition on the Resurrection. Paul is not correcting them on that. He's reminding them of a shared conviction. But they weren't reflecting on that gospel truth, which made them susceptible to error in a related doctrine.

- ❖ This leads to our third observation on the nature of the gospel. It's a good news to be preached; it's an apostolic tradition to be received; **(3) The gospel is a solid foundation to be stood upon.** Paul reminds them of the gospel, "*in which you stand.*" The point is that if you build your theology with the gospel as your foundation, you can't go wrong. But if your views are founded on the wisdom of the world or the philosophies of man, you're at risk of theological error. And you're more at risk of confusing the gospel or outright abandoning it.

- ❖ This is what was happening among the Corinthians. Paul was compelled to write chapter 15 because he heard a report that some in the church were claiming that there is no resurrection of the dead. Look at v12, "*Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*"
 - So no one in the church was denying that Christ was raised from the dead (at least not yet). But some were denying the idea that Christians will one day experience a future bodily resurrection similar to Christ. Instead, they were advocating for a sort of spiritualized experience of life after death. A disembodied heavenly existence. **The main point of chapter 15 is to argue that our life after death will be an embodied experience in new resurrected bodies.**

- ❖ But here, in our text, Paul is *not* trying to convince them of Christ's Resurrection. No, he's arguing that if that's part of your foundation, then how can you deny our future resurrection? That's the logic of his question in v12. **But apparently the gospel was not the foundation for their theology. They were far too dependent on Greek philosophy.**
 - Commentators point out that these Gentile believers were still too influenced by platonic thought (the teachings of Plato). **Particularly the idea that physical existence is inherently inferior to spiritual existence.** For ancient Greeks, salvation would've been understood as an escape from the physical realm. My body would be viewed at best as a mere shell – at worst as a prison house for my soul. **You can see why Greeks would instinctively reject the idea of a future bodily resurrection. Why would I want to be reunited with my former shell or prison house?**

- ❖ This is why Paul spends the first eleven verses retreading the foundational truths of the gospel, especially the Resurrection. Because if you truly believe that Christ has been bodily raised – if that's part of your theological foundation – then you will inevitably reject this errant teaching about our Christian future.
 - **So keep holding fast to this gospel that you received.** Because only this gospel has the power to save. That leads to our fourth observation in v2, "*and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*" The gospel is good news to be preached, an apostolic tradition to be received, a solid foundation to stand upon, and **(4) The power of God that is saving you.**

- ❖ **Christian salvation – to be properly grasped – needs to be understood in three tenses.** In one glorious sense, Christians have been saved – **in the past tense.** We have been delivered from our sins by the finished work of Christ. We are eternally secure because of him. But, as we see here, Scripture also speaks in terms of Christians *being* saved – **in the present tense.** Which is why it's vital that we actively hold fast to the gospel we received.
 - Perhaps you heard the gospel when you were younger and you assented to those truths. **But Paul's point is that if you're not still holding fast to those truths *right now*, then you believed in vain.** Meaning your abandonment of the gospel in the present exposes the vanity of your gospel confession in the past. This is why knowing the events surrounding your conversion – when you first trusted in the gospel – is helpful. But what's more important is whether you're still trusting in the gospel today.
 - **Again, this is why a church shouldn't assume the gospel.** We can't assume that you already know it and have no need to hear it again. We have to keep preaching the gospel to ourselves. So we keep remembering to hold fast to it.

- ❖ We do so, not out of fear of losing our salvation, but in hope that we will be saved – **in the future tense.** By God's grace, we *have been* saved. By God's grace, we are *being* saved. And by God's grace, we *will be* saved. In the sense of making it to the end. Finishing the race. Keeping the faith. God will preserve his own. That's our confidence. **So we keep preaching the gospel so that you keep holding fast to the gospel.** And that's based on the conviction that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16).

The Heart of the Gospel

- ❖ So those are four observations regarding the nature of the gospel that can be unpacked from Paul's words in vv1-2. Now if we look to vv3-7, he reveals the heart of the gospel. The truths that he records in these few verses, Paul considers "*of first importance.*" They are the first things. **All biblical truths are important, but apparently some are more important. Some are more central than others.** They comprise the heart of the gospel.
 - Let me read starting in v3, "*³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*"
 - So at the heart of the gospel are two central truths: **(1) Christ died (and was buried) for our sins according to the Scriptures and (2) Christ was raised (and appeared) on the third day according to the Scriptures.**

- ❖ Let's consider that first truth – "*that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried.*" His burial is presented as proof that Jesus truly died. We only bury corpses. Not living bodies that still have a faint pulse. **But the stress is on his death. How it was a vicarious death. It was done on our behalf.** Christ represented us in death. When he died, we died. His death is counted as our death. That's a truth glorious in itself.
 - But the gospel offers even better news than that. Not only did Christ die on our behalf as our representative. Doing something for us so that we wouldn't have to do it ourselves. Not only did he do that for us. **He also died, once for all, in our place, as our substitute. Doing for us what we could never accomplish for ourselves.** He bore the full wrath of God. He took on the full weight of the punishment for sins.

- ❖ **Friends, there's a subtle but profound difference between Christ serving as your representative on the cross and Christ serving as your substitute on the cross.** Both are true and glorious. But think about it this way. The High Priest serves as a representative. He enters the Holy of Holies and offers sacrifices. But he's not Israel's substitute. He doesn't take their punishment or bear the wrath. He's only their representative who's responsible to bring their substitute to the altar. The substitute is the bull or goat which gets sacrificed.
 - **But what makes Jesus the Great High Priest is that he is both the representative and the substitute.** He serves as both the priest and the sacrifice. He offers himself up on the cross. Dying for our sins.

- ❖ And Paul says that all of that was "*in accordance with the Scriptures.*" So much is packed in that one phrase. **It suggests that Christ's death in the cross was the fulfillment of a much larger redemptive plan that began in the OT.** It's not clear if he had particular verses in mind (c.f. Isa 52:13-53:12; Zech 13:7). Or maybe Paul is saying that Jesus more generally fulfills the biblical motif of a substitutionary sacrifice dying in the place of others.

- ❖ That motif is found throughout the OT. It began in Genesis 3 when an animal was killed so that Adam and Eve's shame could be covered with its skin. The need for a substitute carries over into Exodus 12 where a Passover Lamb dies in the place of Israel's firstborn sons. Then it's codified into Levitical Law with the Day of Atonement. Where, on an annual basis, substitutionary sacrifices were made to take away the sins that Israel committed in the past year. **In accordance with this scriptural pattern, Christ died for sins. And the good news of the gospel is that his substitutionary sacrifice was once for all – with no need to be repeated annually – and it took away the sins of – not just Israel – but of the world.**
- ❖ So that's the first central gospel truth. Christ died (and was buried) for our sins according to the Scriptures. Second, Christ was raised (and appeared) on the third day according to the Scriptures. Look again at v4, *“that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.”*
 - **Now again, like with his burial, the mention of his many appearances is meant to serve as proof that he truly rose from the dead.** He didn't return as a phantom or a ghost. No, he returned in a body. A resurrected body. This is an important point for Paul to make because it's the ground upon which he will argue in the rest of the chapter for the future, bodily resurrection of everyone who is in Christ.
- ❖ But the central truth of Christ's Resurrection is of first importance – not just because it happened and we are a people committed to speaking the truth – but because of what his Resurrection signifies, especially for us who hope in him.
 - **Because Christ's work on the cross – dying for our sins as our representative and substitute – would be in vain if he has not been raised.** As Paul will state, in v17, that would make your faith futile and you would still be in your sins. Doomed to condemnation. And all of Jesus's promises would prove to be empty. If Christ has not been raised, then that means he's a false prophet and a failed messiah. **Our entire faith hinges on the truthfulness of this single statement: *Jesus is alive today, in a resurrected body, seated at the Father's right hand.***
- ❖ Why do we have confidence in that statement? Because there are witnesses. **The most important and authoritative being the witness of Scripture.** Paul says the Resurrection is in accordance with the Scriptures (Jn 20:9; Acts 17:2-3). He probably had in mind Psalm 16:10, which says that God would not abandon his Messiah to Sheol or let his holy one see corruption. Or verses like Hosea 6:2 that alludes to God raising up Israel on the third day.
 - **But in addition to the OT being a witness to the Resurrection, vv5-8 say there were many eyewitnesses who saw the resurrected Christ.** Cephas, referring to Peter (Lk 24:34). The Twelve (Lk 24:36-43; Jn 20:19-23). More than five hundred at one time (maybe on this occasion, Mt 28:16-20). And Paul says most of them are still alive, which implies that his readers can corroborate his claims for themselves. And Christ also appeared to James his brother and to all the apostles.

- ❖ Remember what we said about how unappealing the concept of a resurrection would've been to first-century Greeks. **If Paul was merely concocting a story, if he was in on some vast conspiracy, if he was after easy conversions and amassing followers – then why would he make the Resurrection of Christ a central truth of first importance?** Why would he place it within the heart of the gospel? The only reasonable explanation is that it really happened. And there were plenty of eyewitnesses. Paul himself being one of them.

The Grace of the Gospel

- ❖ And that leads to the third aspect of the gospel to consider – which is powerfully illustrated in Paul's life story – the grace of the gospel. Let's read starting in v8, "*8Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10But 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 that is with me. 11Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*"
- ❖ Paul is numbered among the apostles of Christ. He was an eyewitness to the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-8). He defended his apostleship previously in this letter. **But Paul knows that he's not like the rest of the apostles.**
 - He describes himself as "*untimely born*". That term in the Greek refers to a premature baby. It's a graphic but fitting description. The other apostles knew Jesus and learned at his feet for up to three years during the days of his earthly ministry. They had plenty of gestation time. **They were all full term. But Paul was a premie. He had no time for gestation.** After seeing the risen Christ, he was immediately sent to serve as an apostle to the Gentiles.
- ❖ **So in Paul's eyes, he's the runt of the litter.** But not only because of his untimely birth – but because he's the only apostle who was once an enemy and persecutor of the church. That's why he considers himself "*the least of the apostles.*" Unworthy to even be called one.
 - In his other letters, he describes himself as "*the very least of all the saints*" (Eph 3:8) or as the foremost among sinners (1 Tim 1:15). All because he once persecuted the saints. So Paul evaluates himself with sober judgment. He doesn't think more highly of himself than he ought (Rom 12:3).
- ❖ **But that doesn't mean he has low self-esteem.** He doesn't go around torturing himself out of self-hate. No, Paul soberly judges himself through the lens of the gospel of grace. Look at v10 again, "*But by the grace of God I am what I am.*" **Paul sees himself as a pure product of God's grace.** Look, he knows his past. He knows his sins. But he doesn't allow those past identities to define him anymore. Paul is not saying "I am a rebel against God. I am a persecutor of the church." That's what he once was. A product of sin. But no longer. **Paul says, "By God's grace, I am what I am.** I am an apostle – the least of the apostles – but still, that's what I am. I am a product of grace."

- ❖ Friends, the good news of the gospel is that that same grace is available to you. **You don't have to be defined by your past. You don't have to be defined by your worst mistake or your greatest shame.** If you come to Christ and receive his grace – if you become a Christian – sure, you may not yet be what you ought to be. You may not yet be what you hope to be. **But be sure of this – you are not what you once were.** You can confidently say with the apostle, *“By the grace of God, I am what I am.”* You are a child of God. You are a son or daughter of the most high King. You are beloved. You are a Christian.

- ❖ **And the amazing thing about God's grace is that it doesn't lead you to take your foot off the gas.** To take it easy. On the contrary, Paul says that it's because God's grace was at work in him that he worked harder than the other apostles. That's not a boast. Paul is not trying to take credit for any gospel growth in Corinth. Look at v11. He says it doesn't matter who preached to you the gospel. What matters is that you believe it. **It doesn't matter who plants the seed or who waters it. Because it's God who gives the growth (3:7).**

- ❖ Church, let's respond to the grace of God properly. Let's use it as motivation to work even harder. **To make even more effort to preach and teach the gospel more explicitly and more regularly whenever we gather as the church.** On Sundays. In our small groups. In our homes with our family. Let's not become a church that ever assumes the gospel. Let's always remain a church centered on the gospel.