

Title: The Priority of the Gospel

Text: 1 Cor 15.1-2

Theme: same

Series: 1 Corinthians #87

Prop Stmt. The faithful preaching of the gospel keeps theology and priorities in line.

Read Text:

1 Corinthians 15 is one of the mountain peaks of the Bible. We read it at funerals and we preach from this text on Easter. It is so foundational and should be loved, read, embraced, and used as spiritual marinade for our hearts. I love this chapter and have been waiting for over two years to get to preach through this. If you do not believe in the resurrection, then, as Luther said, you “must deny in a lump the Gospel and everything that is proclaimed of Christ and of God. For all of this is linked together like a chain... Whoever denies this article must simultaneously deny far more..., in brief, that God is God.”<sup>1</sup> I love this chapter and anticipate that you will discover more racing fuel for your worship engine in our study of it. But, before this chapter was read at funerals and preached on Easter mornings, it was written to a group of believers as part of a letter that Paul sent to straighten out some serious problems that were occurring in the church.

He began the letter of 1 Corinthians by addressing the gospel, and now as he is concluding the letter he goes back to the gospel. In chapter one Paul warns the church that by virtue of their lives they were threatening the reputation of the gospel. The gospel is the gospel and will forever stand as the gospel. It is the truth that will never change. It is like the Cornerstone – Jesus Christ. You can curse Him, reject Him, say twisted things about Him, but you cannot change Him. You can curse the gospel, attempt to water it down, twist it, and deny it, but it still stands as the gospel. Because the gospel is from God it stands forever as His truth. It is our task to accurately reflect the accurate truth of the gospel by the integrity of our lives. The content and message of the gospel must be reflected in our day to day decisions, priorities and attitudes. In chapters 12-14, Paul is seeking to straighten out the disorderly behavior of the Corinthian church, and now in chapter 15, Paul is seeking to straighten out their disordered belief.

The opening statement makes it very clear, that the gospel speaks of an established content, a body of doctrine that is not up for sale nor can it be negotiated. You can attempt to judge it, but in reality it judges you. You can attempt to change it, but it will not change. The problem that Paul is now addressing is the fact that some of the believers were teaching or embracing a belief that was in conflict with the gospel. Stepping back for a minute, we see that: The gospel has to be defended against sinful living. So much of the early portions of this book address this truth. Although we cannot tamper with the gospel and change it, when the people who proclaim and embrace the gospel live lives that are not consistent with the gospel, then the message of our lives is that we really do not believe the gospel. If a person were to stand in this pulpit and declare that you are made righteous by your faith in the institution of the church, or by your observances of church ceremonies, or that Christ was not truly God, but God-like,

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works XXVII: Commentaries on 1 Cor 7 and 15, 94 and 95.*

then, I would expect you to denounce that teaching and address that. Error like that is easy to spot and address. But, if a person, who claims to be a Christian, and is living with another person as if they are married when in reality they are not, then the response of the church has to be just as urgent. Otherwise, our claim of the seriousness of sin is exposed by our actions as being something that we really do not believe. The call to personal holiness, is the call to Christlikeness. It is not a call to keeping the house rules or the laws of the club. Personal holiness by the church helps to protect the integrity of the message. When the lives we live violate the truth we claim to believe, we practically deny the gospel. This is why a true church has to preach the gospel, observe the ordinances (which obeys the gospel and displays the gospel) and practice church discipline. If sinful living is not addressed, the gospel will be watered down.

The gospel has to also be guarded against moral or religious additions. Better known as legalism; we have to be very careful that we do not add our own expectations and preferences to the simple message of the gospel. For example, in chapters 12-14, we noted how there are some who claim that unless you speak in tongues, you are not really baptized by the Spirit, which means that you really do not have clear evidence that you are truly saved. Therefore, the way that comes out is that speaking in tongues is proof that you are a believer. In our day it is rather common to hear someone say, “Oh I believe in the gospel, I just don’t believe that Christ is the only way to heaven, that just seems way too narrow minded to me.” That view has added to the gospel the ideas that there are other ways for our sin to be forgiven and for us to be declared righteous, which in essence means that Christ died for nothing. If there are other valid ways to God, then Christ went through the drinking of the cup and the receiving of the just wrath of the Father on the cross as a complete waste of time. That person does not believe **the** gospel. That person believes in **a** gospel. But, **a** gospel that is not **the** gospel is **no** gospel. That view is attempting to add roads that do not exist and telling people that they are safe for travel.

In our day we also have guard the gospel against subtractions. At the heart of the gospel is an irreducible content that cannot be watered down. When you start taking these elements away, particularly in the name of unity, you find out that you have nothing left. For the sake of our Mormon friends, let’s not talk about his deity. For the sake of our Muslim friends, we won’t talk about his death since they find a dying and suffering Savior to be offensive. For the sake of our liberal friends, we won’t make a big deal about his bodily resurrection and ascension to heaven. For the sake of our post-modern friends, we won’t make a big deal about sin. We’ll tone down our rhetoric a bit. But, if we avoid the S-word (SIN) because we are afraid that sin is too offensive, then we end up presenting an incomplete gospel. We fail to appreciate how magnificent the grace of Christ is and how far the power of the cross goes if we don’t seek to come to grips with the depth of our own sin. Listen, you do not have to believe exactly the same as I do about church government, or the details of future events, (known as eschatology), in order to be a follower of Christ, but you cannot deny the virgin birth of Christ, the deity and humanity of Christ, the sinless perfection of Christ, the literal and vicarious death, burial and the bodily resurrection of Christ and still have the gospel. If a person says, “Oh, I believe in the gospel, I just don’t believe in the resurrection of Christ” that person

does not believe in the gospel. It is the issue of the resurrection that is in the cross hairs of this text. Technically, the resurrection of Christ is not being attacked by a frontal assault, but some in the church at Corinth were teaching (v.12) that there is no resurrection of the dead, but that Christ was an exception. Paul rightly responds to this. His main argument is simple. Christ was resurrected and true believers are in Christ. Being in Christ means that I receive the benefits of his life and ministry. I am credited with his life, I am credited with his death, and like Him, I will be resurrected. Therefore, Paul begins by establishing the fact of the resurrection of Christ.

In these first eleven verses he says, I preached the resurrection of Christ because it is absolutely vital to the integrity of the gospel. You believed what I preached. This has always been the collective witness of the apostles and is foundational to the gospel which is foundational to the church. Without the resurrection of Christ, He is nothing more than a deluded and deranged teacher who made a scene at a point in time and is now gone. The fact that some of you are teaching that there is no resurrection of the dead is not only wrong, but if you really believe this, then you are setting the groundwork for denying the resurrection of Christ and the gospel itself. That is the main argument of this text. But the way Paul argues this point is what I want to understand as well. Paul demonstrates by his previous ministry to these believers and now by his reaction to this problem that...

1. **The Gospel Must be Preached.** (1a) (2, 11, 12)

- A. **Publicly**

God uses the public preaching of the gospel as the means by which people are exposed to the gospel, convicted of their sin, and convinced of their need of the Savior. In these first 12 verses, Paul speaks four times of the preaching of the gospel. Does preaching the gospel really matter that much? Can't we just share it on a personal level, you, know – one on one sort of stuff? People aren't really into that confrontational sort of thing any more. Instead of calling it the message, why don't we call it, sharing time, when different people share their story? You know, you tell your story, I'll tell my story, we'll all feel good about our stories, but let's not preach, or make our stories too preachy because it sounds so authoritative, so one-sided, so absolute, so opinionated, so narrow and that makes people uncomfortable. After all, times change and so do the methods. The only thing that matters is that the message does not change. So, as long as we still believe the message, we just don't have to appear to be so exclusive with it. There is some truth to the fact that some methods change. But, preaching is a God-ordained and God-mandated method for the church to proclaim the gospel. What you do publicly reveals what you really believe. If you are embarrassed about the preaching of the gospel, it is because you really do not believe it.

- B. **Repeatedly**

The gospel must be preached repeatedly because the gospel is the literal and practical foundation to the life and relationships of the church. The preaching of the gospel is not a one-time event. The gospel is so far reaching, so all-encompassing, so foundational to

all that we are, that it must be preached over and over not only so that people who are not saved will be converted, but so that Christians will be continually amazed at the grace of God in their lives. The preaching of the gospel keeps the church humble because the preaching of the gospel reminds us of our need.

**“There are professing Christians who can speak of themselves in terms of admiration; but, from my inmost heart, I loathe such speeches more and more every day that I live. Those who talk in such boastful fashion must be constituted very differently from me. While they are congratulating themselves, I have to lie humbly at the foot of Christ’s Cross, and marvel that I am saved at all, for I know that I am saved. I have to wonder that I do not believe Christ more, and equally wonder that I am privileged to believe in Him at all – to wonder that I do not love Him more, and equally to wonder that I am not holier, and equally to wonder that I have any desire to be holy at all considering what a polluted, debased, depraved nature I find still within my soul, notwithstanding all that divine grace has done in me. If God were ever to allow the fountains of the great deeps of depravity to break up in the best man that lives, he would make as bad a devil as the devil himself is. I care nothing for what these boasters say concerning their own perfections; I feel sure that they do not know themselves, or they could not talk as they often do. There is tinder enough in the saint who is nearest to heaven to kindle another hell if God should but permit a spark to fall upon it. In the very best of men there is an infernal and well-nigh infinite depth of depravity. Some Christians never seem to find this out. I almost wish that they might not do so, for it is a painful discovery for anyone to make; but it has the beneficial effect of making us cease from trusting in ourselves, and causing us to glory only in the Lord.” (CH Spurgeon – Man’s Depravity)<sup>2</sup>**

Repeated preaching of the gospel helps to cultivate an atmosphere of humility in the church because the cross reminds me of how much my sin costs. The enormous price that Christ paid was necessary because of my enormous guilt. I need to remember that. But, the preaching of the gospel will also help cultivate an atmosphere of a Christ-driven joy and confidence. The bearing of my wrath is an important part of the gospel, but the offering of the perfectly righteous life of Christ on the cross as a sacrifice that satisfied the justice of God is also an important part as well. This perfectly righteous life that was offered is the reason why I can be credited with a righteousness that is not my own. We know that the offering of Christ on the cross was perfectly accepted by the Father because He raised Christ from the dead, and raised Christ on High to sit at His right hand and will send Him back to rule from David’s throne.

Do you see it? The humility of Christ humbles me/us. The resurrection and ascension of Christ gives me God-centered confidence. We have a God-centered confidence because He keeps His promises. That is a far cry from a self-centered arrogance. If we don’t preach the gospel, we will doubt God and believe ourselves. If we preach the gospel, we will believe God and see ourselves the way we should.

## 2. The Gospel Must be Received. (1b)

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in “A Fight to the Death” p.21-22 Wayne Mack who quoted it from AW Pink.

In verse 1, Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that they received the gospel. That is, they believed it. The story of this is told back in Acts 18. Paul preached the gospel. That was Paul's job. That is the primary responsibility of the preacher. He must preach the gospel. But what the preacher cannot do, is believe it for you. You have to receive it. You have to accept it. You have to personally accept it.

### **A. Personally**

In these opening verses, Paul is reminding these people that at one point they received what he was saying. If you truly received the gospel, it has ongoing ramifications. If you truly received the gospel, then you will continue to stand on the gospel. Your past reception will be seen in your present standing. That is why the gospel must not only be received personally, but it must be continually and consistently received.

### **B. Consistently**

The last phrase of verse 1 is a set-up for verse 2. Your present standing (your object of faith, what you are standing on) is a reflection of what you really believe. The validity of your belief is reflected in the manner in which you are standing. I am not implying that genuine faith results in a perfectly organized life without struggles. The truth is, according to Romans 7, the Christian life is a struggle and we will struggle until we are home in glory which is why we must continue to receive the gospel, continue to believe the gospel, not for justification, but as the basis and means for our sanctification. In verse 2 we see that...

### **3. The Gospel Must be Worked Out. (new word – changed after printing)**

By this gospel you are saved (lit. being saved), if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise (if you don't hold firmly to the gospel), your belief was wasted (vain), that is, it was not authentic. The word translated vain can also mean haphazard, incoherent and confused.

There are three possible interpretations of this verse. Is Paul teaching that these are genuine believers who run the risk of being inconsistent with their faith if they accept this notion that there is no resurrection of the dead? If that is what Paul is saying then we could translate this as: "Through this gospel you are in process of being saved if you hold fast to the substance of the gospel that I proclaimed to you – unless you believed without coherent consideration."<sup>3</sup> Or, is Paul teaching that there are some people who appear to be believers, but who may not actually be believers, and that their defection from the faith reveals that they were never genuine to begin with? Or, is Paul teaching that some of these people were at one time truly saved, but were in danger of losing their salvation? Paul never taught this third view. But, while the idea of "once saved, always saved" is valid, the way it is often taught is not valid. Romans answers the question: How can a person be declared righteous before God? The answer is; by faith alone in

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<sup>3</sup> Thistleton, p. 1182 (his translation)

Christ alone. The moment that person believes, that person is sealed by the Spirit. But how do we know if that person truly believed? What kind of faith saves? That is the question that the book of James answers. The kind of faith that saves is a living, dynamic, struggling, growing and ongoing faith. If you look at the fruit of a person's life and you see bananas hanging on the tree, it doesn't matter if that person says, I am not a banana tree 'cause I prayed the apple prayer. And, if you simply pull off all the bananas and duct tape apples in their place, time and pressure will reveal what you really are, which is another reason why the church has to keep on preaching the gospel, because there are banana trees who are pretending to be apple trees. As critical of a truth as that is, I don't think that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is what Paul is dealing with here.

In this text, I think that Paul is seriously concerned about the fact that some of these believers did not connect the theological dots of the gospel when they heard it. And that is exactly what he is going to do for them. The gospel provides some very clear implications and they must be applied. Look at v. 12. Some are teaching that there is no resurrection of the dead. Paul is screaming about this, because you cannot hold on to two competing and inconsistent truths. You cannot embrace the gospel and deny the resurrection of the dead. But there were some people who did not realize this. Now, hold that thought for a minute.

There are three tenses (or aspects) of salvation. You were saved (justification - past) e.g. Eph 2.8. You are being saved (sanctification - present) e.g. 2 Cor. 3.18. And you will be saved (glorification - future) e.g. Romans 8.29-30. I am saved from the wrath of God and the penalty of sin. I am being saved from the power of sin. I will be saved from the presence of sin. Philippians 1.6 captures all three aspects. The gospel saves you from the penalty of sin, and as you work out the implications of the gospel, you are being saved from the power of sin, although that process is never fully complete in this life, but one day in heaven you will be saved from the presence of sin. If, as a follower of Christ we are holding on to two competing and inconsistent ideas, this is going to mess up our growth as a follower of Christ. I really believe that is what Paul is getting at here in this text. If you start messing with the substance of what I preached to you, then the content of your faith is going to be all muddled up and your growth as a follower of Christ is going to be seriously affected.

It is like the person who says, I believe in Jesus, but I don't think that Jonah and the big fish story is valid at all. Do you see a problem with that? I hope so, because Jesus believed the Jonah story and used Jonah as an illustration of his resurrection (Matt 12.39-42). When you point this out, this person now has a choice to make. If I really believe Jesus, then I am forced to embrace the OT story of Jonah. I must surrender my ideas to the Word of God.

Corinth lived in the shadow of Athens. Plato's influence is still with us now, and was a very powerful force then. The idea of a resurrection was not a sophisticated thought in those days. Paul is pointing out that if you are going to follow Christ, you have to believe

it all. Christianity is not a buffet, it is a body of truth to which we surrender every single part of our lives. We surrender it all.