

*Sermon on 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 prepared by Jonathan Shradar*

How we live is the greatest indicator of what is important to us. That surely is a statement that few people would disagree with... what we invest in, spend time doing, what we pursue and the like are usually pretty good markers of priorities in our lives. This can be challenging because many of us have arrived, at least mentally to a place where we “know” the things that are supposed to be central to our lives. The good things. But on reflection, and maybe a little help from some honest friends, we can decypher what is truly our driver, and that can be convicting. So we hustle and come up with reasons why and articulate how we are doing this for the good of the others thing as if adding them to the mix makes it better...

This week I heard a commercial that said “Moms know their kids need love, encouragement and milk...” Sprinkle on some good ideas to get at what is most important - selling milk!

So we live this big, busy scramble to rank the important things and shape our lives around them - do we rank by what feels right, what meets my needs, what is culturally acceptable, what will score the most likes and retweets...

For the Christian though, we don't create the list. We don't rank what is most important. The Bible is one long redemptive story serving as an invitation back to what is most important... and when it is rightly seen, everything is meant to flow from it. But we get distracted and convinced of other things, even good things and we can miss the point. When things get off center... well strange stuff happens.

The same is true of the church, the collective group of individuals meant to be on mission together, keeping the main thing the main thing. At times, we can get our emphasis on other things and miss the point. In 1 Corinthians Paul has been correcting this collection of house churches by describing the shape and function of a church that is formed by the preaching of Christ and him crucified, and the reminder we come to today serves as reorienting for us and all churches.

**The gospel is the most important thing.** It's the center of it all.

**1 Corinthians 15:1-11** “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, [2] and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. [3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, [5] and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. [6] Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. [7] Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. [8] Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. [9] For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. [10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his

grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. [11] Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.” (ESV)

Paul, has been calling the Corinthian church to action in response to the news of Jesus. That they would have unity, that they would battle sin together, that they would pursue relationships with one another that reflect Christ’s love, that they would worship appropriately and that the gifts the Spirit gives to the church would not be neglected or abused. Then from the practical things of church life, Paul moves again to right thinking about Jesus. With a pastoral heart, Paul reminds the church of what forms them, gives them security, and hope. This is the center of life, the church and their faith. The gospel.

Here he drops the anchor of stability for the church, what everything is meant to be tethered to.

As we work through this text this morning our path will be to understand the Story at the Center, hear what Life from the Center is like, and find hope in Access to the Center.

### **The gospel is the most important thing.**

So what is this gospel, this good news we keep talking about?

#### **1) Story at the Center**

“I delivered to you as of first importance...” As most important, the same message that I received.’ With this set up Paul places priority on this gospel that he has preached to them and to all the churches. It is the thing that defines believers, which makes this faith stand apart from others and that which drives all of life in response to it.

And these words are important because the church is in danger of making something else its cornerstone - it’s distinctive expression, and as we will see in the coming verses, a denial of the gospel itself. It is not only a Corinthian problem. All through the history of the church we see shifts away from this news of first importance - Reformation was a reclaiming it as the story at the center, and in our day when the marketers tells us it is no longer appealing, how quick we can be to grab ahold of something less than this.

While there may be many definitions, this is the gospel that Paul reminds us of; the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.

By dying there is an assumption that someone has lived. So Christ, Jesus breathed, ate, related, ministered and then died. But not of old age or an accident. Jesus died for our sins. On a cross. On purpose.

This is where the grand problem is resolved. Humanity in sin, from the first moments in the garden of creation rebelling against God's instruction, then living always "missing the mark." Pursuing flesh, giving over our hearts to other little gods or idols, violence, disregard for others... what was created corrupted. Now at distance from God and under judgment for sin. The wages, what sin earns is death.

This is why Jesus died, for our sins. To take the judgment against sin and break its reign in our lives. His death atones for our sin - pays a debt we could never pay, that provides forgiveness, new life and new purpose. And we can't miss this piece, as much as we want to be convinced of our goodness...

"There is no true proclamation of the gospel which does not explain, in New Testament terms, the link between human sin and the death of Christ. Indeed, there is no gospel at all unless the death of Christ can be seen to deal with sin once and for all. The fact of resurrection by itself says little about the heart of the gospel, unless it can be shown that 'the sting of death is sin' (15:56) and that the resurrection of Christ has therefore drawn that sting." Prior

From this death for sin Jesus is buried, really dead, given over to the earth as if it is the end of the story. But it is not, he was also raised on the third day having taken on the full weight of sin, extinguishing its sting and defeating the final enemy, death.

This is big. Not only has Jesus dealt with the cosmic problem of sin, changing the script for humanity, but he also walked out of the grave that was meant to entomb him forever. What was once permanent is made temporary and life bursts forth, from him for us.

It was no slight of hand, no trick by a few clever followers. Jesus truly rose from the dead, and appeared to people, he taught them and prayed with them, promising his Spirit for them. He appeared to Peter and the twelve; he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time (many of which were still alive when Paul is writing). Jesus then appeared to his brother James and all the apostles... last of all to Paul himself on the road of his conversion, the place of his belief in Christ.

We know the effects of his appearing... we are the church today because of the resurrection, that those who saw Jesus, who touch him after his resurrection would give over their whole lives to proclaim him, to the ends of the earth.

And this was no random set of events. The death and resurrection were in accordance with the Scriptures... they followed what the Word of God said was to take place. The suffering servant, taking on the transgressions of the people, the king taking his throne through a tomb. It was planned, each fact and miracle, even that you would hear it and believe.

This is what is at the Center. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It makes all of his teaching true, it gives his grace and mercy their effectiveness and it gives us the place from which to form not only our faith but all of our lives.

"The gospel is intended to be the central power around which one's life revolves. If a Christian's life revolves around another person, that other person will inevitably crush that individual. If a Christian's life revolves around himself, he will implode. But if his life is centered around the gospel, then he orbits around the one person who will not crush him (he was already crushed for you), and the believer will not implode because his center of gravity is properly aligned... If the truth of the centrality of the gospel brings harmonious balance into a sinner's life, why make the mistake of pushing the gospel to the periphery?" Um

## **2) Life from the Center**

It is the news that Paul preached, that the church received. This was the entry to a life from the center, hearing and believing the gospel. That Jesus lived for you, that he died in your place and rose from the dead, eliminating every enemy that might harm you. It is the fuel then for all of life, not just their weekly worship, or once a month worship, but for every interaction, relationship, decision, pursuit and passion.

It is that "in which you stand," it is the thing that gives present stability based on past actions. It is why we can get up in the morning, experiencing new mercies because the gospel is true. That we are secure, forgiven and given purpose. It is in the gospel that we stand against the fear of judgment, of social acceptance, of promotion, of class.

The gospel is our life vest, our armor, our safety line. And it is for every situation in which you are part.

I have a friend in Washington that takes workplace safety very seriously. Trained to be a fireman and was working at the church I was part of. Visiting one of our campuses I watched him change lightbulbs. What was interesting was that he was on a ladder but only 8 feet or so off the ground - all pretty straight forward. Even so, he wore a safety harness (around his shoulders and legs) and clamped into the rigging... for each light bulb. That harness makes complete sense (to me) when it comes to 20 or more feet... something with a dramatic fall... but its real purpose is to keep you safe in every situation...

How often we approach the gospel the same way... we rehearse it when faced with the big interview or exam (I am a child of God, Jesus has died for me...) but we don't even think of it when the kids have reached defcon 2 with their screaming... or when we are doing routine tasks that we can handle on our own.

By saying it is the truth in which we stand, it permeates everything, bolsters us, gives us support, strength, our form - this is why Paul is reminding the church and us here, that we would stand

more confidently (not in our own definition of spiritualism or the mysterious, but in the gospel of Jesus).

He also says it is that “by which you are being saved...” Wait a second Paul, I thought I was once saved always saved?! This reminder is coming to the church, to those that are already believers of the gospel. So Paul is not only thinking the act of justification, being made right with God at belief in Jesus, but something ongoing, a saving that occurs through the gospel. “Evidently, the gospel message is not only for evangelism but also for discipleship; not only for unbelievers, but also for believers.”

Just as we stand in the immovable truth of Jesus’ work for us on the cross, the same truth works in us continual change for the glory of God and our good. We have here the rhythm of gospel transformation: for those united to Christ the truth of the gospel always produces a transformed life, which can be sustained in an ongoing way only by the power of the gospel.

And it empowers us for life.

**1 Corinthians 15:10** “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” (ESV)

Paul’s story is not different from ours in that our source is the same. By the grace of God, experienced in the gospel, we are what we are, gifted, claimed, a child of God and it is by that same grace we live, take on the tasks before us, and work.

This is what Paul has been describing in the last few chapters, a people empowered by the Spirit of God to worship and live. It begins in the gospel. It frees us to labor, not to earn but from what we have been given.

“The ultimate enemy has been defeated, so all of our other minor enemies are stripped of their power. Individuals are enabled to “work harder,” but not for gain or building an identity or security - Christians already have all of those things. We don’t even work from our own power; rather it is “the grace of God that it is with [us].” Um

Not only do we stand in this truth of Jesus, we are transformed by it, and empowered to live this adventure by it. With the gospel at the center of it all for us, everything changes, we are no longer the most important thing but we taste real life with Jesus as the thing of first importance. It is our oxygen.

“The gospel de-centers unbelievers from the center of their own life. They recognize their unworthiness. They recognize they are what they are by grace. The gospel is now a functional identity. Without effort or work Christians are put in perfect relationship with God and experience all the benefits of union with Christ. His incarnation means that he always meets

everyone where he or she is. His perfect life means that Christians are perfectly accepted by God regardless of their ability to be righteous. His substitutionary death means that Christians need no longer fear punishment for their sins - he has borne the full penalty. His burial means that his death on one's behalf was no mirage and that someone has gone to face the consequences to replace death. His resurrection means that death has been defeated - it has been stripped of its power and sting. Christians will ultimately be raised again to new life because of their union with the resurrected Christ... The result of this free, full grace is that Christians live their lives to the full" Um

Whatever else should we want?! What grace, what a gift. What a lasting anchor or security and power. What a life. To be experience the love of God in Christ, by his work for us.

Hold fast, cling to this truth... unless you believed in vain. A warning from Paul toward genuine belief, humbling, recognition of our need and Christ's gift belief. Not because that's how we were raised (or whatever reason we claim belief) but because we know this Jesus who died, was buried and was raised.

This warning though doesn't take any wind out of the sails of the gospel, because it means you can believe, that at the preaching of the gospel all have access to the center...

### **3) Access to the Center**

**1 Corinthians 15:8-9** "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. [9] For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." (ESV)

I am thankful that God used Paul to write these words, to plant this church and proclaim the gospel to Asia and Europe. Because he is the one that is unlikely. He didn't walk with Jesus during his ministry. Quite the opposite, he persecuted the church. And not in just some shady facebook comments, he watched Christians be murdered - "let me hold your coat while you stone that believer..." He denies Christ right until being on a road unable to move in the presence of the risen King.

This means that anyone can get in on it. Even the persecutors, the sinners, the wrecks, the broken, the violent, the liars, those that lust, those that cheat, steal, and that have run after other gods... All of us, can get in on the gospel.

*Immanuel Mantra:* First, "I'm a complete idiot." Second, "My future is incredibly bright." Third, "Anyone can get in on this."

What glorious news this is. **Romans 3:23-26** "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to

show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (ESV)

It also means that our security is not based on our ability to keep the faith - but the object of our faith's ability to keep up. When we fail, we get back up, when we slide others things into the center of our lives, we can be reminded of the gospel and return to it as the prize that Jesus is. This is the hope for the Corinthians... "Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters of the gospel..." It is our hope too.

Hear it again today, believe it and let God's Spirit transform you. "God takes the truth - the historical truth of the resurrection - and burns it deep into human hearts so that the gospel will be received and the personal implications will be recognized..." that true life, full life would be realized in Christ.

### **The gospel is the most important thing.**

*Response:* The gospel is still the most important thing if you don't believe, because of what it says about us apart from Christ. That there is still a need of resolution for sin... So we:

#### Preach it, receive it, let it be the center

As we head into Holy Week, the days leading up to our celebration of Easter... this is what we declare, what we share, because we have found life in it.

"...our calling is to proclaim the Resurrection as those who, with Paul, are absolutely convinced of its reality and significance. Such conviction leads also to the proclamation of the gospel itself, the good news that God loves sinners and has made provision through Christ's death and resurrection to overcome their alienation, so that they too may know divine forgiveness and have a sure hope for the future." Fee

As we declare it, we hear it and receive it - we believe. And we let it pervade all of who we are.

"The only proper response to grace is total commitment with every fibre of our being." May God's grace produce such energetic single-mindedness, such unrelenting faith in us!

In it we stand, we are saved and we are empowered to live for Christ's glory.

There are many places that people will go for what can only truly be found in the gospel - acceptance, help, hope. There are many things that claim to be viable alternatives but fail to deliver... Some might even think all we need is to share a Pepsi...

But the gospel alone is the most important thing. Cling to this gospel... proclaim it, and live.

**1 Peter 1:24-25** “for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, [25] but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.” (ESV)