

Gospel Driven Christianity

(1 Corinthians 15:1-11)

I'm sure most of us have heard the saying, "God helps those who help themselves." Is this saying biblical? The saying may have some merit to it depending on how a person uses it. However, the saying itself, which is not found in the bible, is not a biblical concept. In fact, I want to submit to you that it's anti-gospel.

The gospel of the grace of God is not that God helps those who help themselves but that *God helps those who realize they can't help themselves*. The gospel is that Christ did for us on the cross what we could not do for ourselves so that we might know Him and the power of His resurrection at work in our lives (Romans 8:3-4).

When it comes to our salvation most Christians understand that Christ did for us what we could never do for ourselves. But when it comes to living the Christian life, some believers seem to think that the gospel no longer applies. The mindset is that, "although salvation is by grace; living the Christian life is hard work. But if we do our part, God will do his. If we mess up, well, we just need to try harder."

Now the bible doesn't promise that the Christian life will be easy. In our text, Paul explained post-conversion, "*I worked harder than any of them...*" (1 Corinthians 15:10). But the reason Paul worked harder than others wasn't because he had a type A personality. As Paul further explained, "*I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Paul didn't work hard so that God would then do His part to help him. He wasn't meeting God half way. Paul worked hard because the grace of God was at work in Him.

Main idea: The gospel of the grace of God is not only the grounds for our salvation but the basis for our sanctification and service.

To unfold this theme, we are going to consider 3 reasons why our entire Christian life ought to be driven by the gospel.

1. The gospel is the basis of our present salvation

First of all, our Christian lives ought to be driven by the gospel because it is **the basis for our present salvation**. Remember, the Corinthians earnestly desired spiritual gifts. However, many of them were not deeply rooted in God's love, which is demonstrated most beautifully in the gospel. Consequently, they lost sight of the purpose of the gifts. They exercised their gifts to bring attention to themselves, rather than to lift others up.

So after explaining to the Corinthians that love not the gifts must be their first pursuit in chapters 12-14, Paul writes: *"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"* (1 Corinthians 15:1:2).

Notice here that Paul is not reminding unbelievers, but believers of the gospel that he preached to them. Why did Paul remind believers about the gospel if they had already received it and were already saved? He reminded them about the gospel because it not only brought them to salvation in the past, and will bring them salvation in the future, but also because the gospel has transformational implications in the present.

If you're a believer, the gospel has certainly impacted you in the past. Paul reminds the Corinthians that when he preached the gospel to them in the past, they "received" it. We are saved today if sometime in our past we received the gospel, which saved us from our sins and reconciled us to God. The word "received" in reference to the gospel is a synonym for believing and accepting with your heart the good news of Jesus Christ (John 1:11-12).

But it's important to note that Paul is conveying that the same gospel which they received in the past, and were standing upon in the present is also saving them in the present (v.1b-2a). In other words, the gospel not only saved them in the past, but was also sustaining them and transforming them in the here and now. And it would continue to sustain them and transformed them until their salvation is fully realized in the future in their resurrection bodies.

So, the saving power of the gospel is intended to have transformational impact in our past, present and future realities. Now this present impact that the gospel is intended to have in the life of the Corinthian believers will be realized, Paul says, "*if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain*" (1 Corinthians 15:2b).

The same is true in our lives. If the saving power of the gospel is going to do what it is intended to do in our lives, we must hold fast to the gospel. And we will hold fast, *unless* [as Paul writes] *we have believed in vain*. What does Paul mean by, "*unless you believed in vain*." In the case of the Corinthians, there were some that professed to be believers, but were denying aspects of the gospel, and in particular, the resurrection. Later, in verse 17, Paul writes, "*And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins*" (1 Corinthians 15:7).

The resurrection of Jesus is central to the message of the gospel. Do you know, the reason there is death in our world is because of sin? Death is a penalty for sin. Jesus died to absorb the judgment that we deserve so that we can receive eternal life. But if Christ only died in our place, and did not rise from the dead, we would still be under the condemnation of sin. Sin and death would still have dominion over us. But Jesus did rise from the dead and His resurrection is the proof that authoritatively and powerfully declares to the believer that the debt of their sin has been paid in full. Sin no longer has power over the believer. And the resurrection power of Jesus is not only a future reality for the believer but it's also a present experience that began in us when we believed.

In light of this, do you know that a common error that believers make is to view the power of the gospel as only something that happened in the past and that will only benefit you again in the future. Many think that if you already received the gospel you must move on to deeper things. Although there are other things we need to learn about the Christian life, the gospel must remain central. The gospel is not something we move away from, the gospel is something we must dive deeper into. The major problem with thinking of the gospel only in terms of the past or the future is that we will miss the present transformational impact that the gospel must continue to have, as we stand upon it, in our present and everyday lives.

This brings us to a second reason why our entire Christian life ought to be driven by the gospel of the grace of God.

2. The gospel is the basis of our progressive sanctification

The gospel is not only the basis of our past, present and future salvation, but also of our **progressive sanctification**. Notice again that Paul doesn't only refer to the saving power of the gospel as a past or future event, as he does in other places (i.e. Ephesian 2:8; and 1 Cor. 15:50-58). In 1 Corinthians 15:2, Paul speaks of salvation as a present reality by using the present tense, "...*you are being saved.*"

Often when Christians think of the word saved, we think either in terms of what we've been saved from, namely the penalty of our sin, or what we've been saved to, namely to live forever in heaven. But salvation is more than escaping hell and getting a ticket to heaven. We are saved from our sins so that we can be reconciled to God. The gift of God in salvation is eternal life. But eternal life doesn't just begin when you get to heaven. It begins the moment that you receive the gospel by faith. And eternal life is more than living forever. Jesus said in John 17:3 that eternal life is to know God and His Son whom he has sent.

How many of you know, the greatest gift of our salvation is that God in the person and power of the Spirit takes residence in our mortal bodies. The resurrection is not just a future reality for the Christian. A Christian, who receives the gospel, has resurrection power inside of

Him through the indwelling Spirit. In Christ and through the Spirit we are new creations. We are alive unto God (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The greatest treasure of our salvation is the light of the glory of God magnified in the gospel shining in our hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6). The light of the glory of God shining in our hearts in the person of Jesus is the primary ministry of the Holy Spirit. And the more we know the beauty of Christ through the gospel the more we will be like Him. This is what Paul means when he says to the Corinthian believers that through the gospel *you are being saved*. The moment we are saved God began His work of sanctification in us, which is the ongoing process by which believers become more and more like Jesus as they behold His glory and grow in their relationship with Him (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Do you know what enables a believer to put sin to death in his life? It's not will power. It's not because God helps those who help themselves. What enables us to put sin to death and become more like Jesus is the superior satisfaction that we find in Christ in and through the gospel (Col. 3:5-10). If you profess to be saved, but you don't know the present reality of what Paul is talking about when he wrote, "*you are being saved*" it's very possible that you are not saved because you have believed in vain.

Many today have believed in vain not because they don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, which seems to be the case with some in the church of Corinth. Some believe in vain today because they only want Jesus to be their Savior but not their Lord. Others have believed in vain because they've been presented with a prosperity gospel that says that if you believe in Jesus, he will make you healthy and wealthy. This is a false gospel. And I'm afraid that there are many others who have believed in vain because they believed in Jesus only to give them a get out of hell free card, but not so that they can be reconciled to a Holy God.

In his book, "God is the gospel, subtitled, Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself, John Piper writes; "This is crucial to see. Many people seem to embrace the good news without embracing God. There

is no sure evidence that we have a new heart just because we want to escape hell. That's a perfectly natural desire, not a supernatural one. It doesn't take a new heart to want the psychological relief of forgiveness, or the removal of God's wrath, or the inheritance of God's world. All these things are understandable without any spiritual change. You don't need to be born again to want these things. The devils want them. It is not wrong to want them. Indeed it is folly not to. But the evidence that we have been changed is that we want these things because they bring us to the enjoyment of God. This is the greatest thing Christ died for. This is the greatest good in the good news. Why is that? Because we were made to experience full and lasting happiness from seeing and savoring the glory of God. If our best joy comes from something less, we are idolaters and God is dishonored. He created us in such a way that his glory is displayed through our joy in it. The gospel of Christ is the good news that at the cost of his Son's life, God has done everything necessary to enthrall us with what will make us eternally and ever-increasingly happy-namely, himself.”

Have you believed in the true gospel unto a salvation that makes knowing Jesus and His faithful love better than anything in this earthly life? Paul is saying to the Corinthians, and to us, who profess faith in Christ, that if our present everyday lives are not displaying the transforming power of the gospel, we have believed in vain, that is, with no supernatural results.

Now after emphasizing the present saving implications of the gospel, Paul goes on to summarize the essential truths of the gospel that he preached when the Corinthians first believed. He writes: *“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,”* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

It's important to note here that when Paul reminds the Corinthians of the essence of the gospel, he highlights two essential facts and two irrefutable evidences. The first essential fact of the gospel that Paul highlights is that Christ died for our sins (v.3). This means that Christ

died as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. In other words, on the cross Jesus paid the debt of our sin thus satisfying the justifiable wrath of God on our behalf. And keep in mind that He didn't just die for our sin so that we can receive a get out of hell free card, but so that we can be reconciled to God and enjoy Him in this life and forevermore.

In 1 Peter 3:18, God's word says, "*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,*" (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus died to bring us to God so that we might know His transforming presence and resurrection power inside of us.

Now after presenting the first essential fact of the gospel, Paul gives two irrefutable evidences, namely the scriptures, and Christ's burial. It doesn't take much faith to believe in Jesus' death. No reputable historian will deny the existence of Jesus nor his death. But the fact that Christ died for our sins, however, is a matter of faith, a faith that is supported by the revelation of scripture. The scriptures not only record the historical facts of Christ's death, but the significance and meaning of the historical facts of Christ death. We find this evidence—this proof of the facts of Christ's death and its redemptive significance, for example, in Isaiah's prophecy of the coming Messiah in Isaiah 53, which was written over seven hundred years before the first coming of Jesus (Isa. 53:5-9).

So, while the burial of Jesus proved the historical fact of His death, the prophecies in the Old Testament scriptures proved the redemptive purpose of His death, namely to pay the penalty for our sins, which separates us from God the Father..

Now after giving the first essential truth of the gospel, namely Christ's substitutionary death, in 1 Corinthians 15:4-5, Paul presents a second essential truth of the gospel, namely that Jesus was raised on the third day from the dead. And once again, the proof of his resurrection was also verified in the prophetic scriptures (Isaiah 53:10-11; Psalm 16:10), and also by eyewitnesses, which Paul listed in verse 5-6.

As one commentator explains: “That this prophecy of the Resurrection had been fulfilled by none other than Jesus of Nazareth was confirmed to Paul and hundreds of other eyewitnesses through a variety of appearances. It doesn’t take faith to believe Jesus died, but to believe in the miraculous, bodily resurrection of Jesus takes great faith...With both the prophetic Scriptures and the numerous eyewitnesses of the risen Lord pointing to the resurrection of the crucified Messiah, there could be no doubt in the minds of hundreds of original disciples that Jesus of Nazareth had miraculously risen from the dead. Physically—in the same body that had been crucified and buried—Jesus was both restored and glorified, His body transformed into a perfect, immortal condition, no longer susceptible to suffering and death. Fit for glory, Jesus Christ conquered death not only for Himself but also for all who would believe on Him for eternal life” (Insights on 1 & 2 Corinthians, Charles R. Swindoll).

Now notice also that one of those eyewitnesses, who Jesus appeared to as proof of His resurrection, was Paul himself. He writes: “*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*” (1 Corinthians 15:8-9). When Paul says that Jesus appeared to him as one untimely born, he’s contrasting himself to the other apostles who spent 3 years being discipled by Jesus. But like a premature baby that is not fully developed, Paul encountered the risen Lord without any of the development that the other apostles received from Jesus.

Furthermore, Paul, who was not even a disciple of Christ when he encountered the risen Lord, also persecuted the church of God. But by appearing to Paul in this state of hostility and rebellion, Paul’s conversion from being a murderer of Christians to becoming a missionary for Christ, became living proof of the saving power of the gospel and the resurrection of Jesus.

How many of you know that the same grace and resurrection power that transformed Paul from a murderer to a missionary is still at work today in the lives of those who receive the gospel by faith and live in light of it day by day. As Dan Ortlund wrote, “The gospel is not only

the gateway into the Christian life but it is the pathway of the Christian life.”

Paul was a great servant of Jesus Christ because he never moved away from the gospel. Rather Paul lived his life in view of the love and grace of God displayed in the gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Paul understood that he was not only saved by the grace of the gospel, but that the finished work of Christ gave him unlimited access to the throne of God’s grace to be all that God saved him to be.

This brings us to a final reason why the entire Christian life ought to be driven by the gospel of the grace of God.

3. The gospel is the basis for our priestly service

The gospel is not only the basis of our **present salvation**, and of our **progressive sanctification**, it is the basis for our **priestly service**. After summarizing the essence of the gospel and the evidence for the resurrection, which included Paul’s transformation, Paul concludes: *“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”* (1 Corinthians 15:10)

Paul, who was formerly a persecutor of the church, knew that he was no longer the same man that he was before he encountered Jesus. And he knew he was a changed man not because he pulled himself up by his own bootstraps. Rather Paul said, *I am what I am by the grace of God.*

How many of you know that the most precious gift offered to man is the Grace of God? What is the grace of God? The grace of God is the unmerited generosity of God that brings salvation to man at the expense of Christ. This is the gospel. The incarnation of Jesus, His sinless life, His substitutionary death for our sin, and His resurrection, are all the provision of God’s grace.

But remember the amazing grace that God displayed in the incarnation of Christ provides much more than escape from the judgment of sin. The grace of the gospel brings us to God. In the Old Testament, only the high priest could enter the most holy place in the temple behind the curtain where God manifested His presence. But through Christ's saving work, the curtain, which symbolized His flesh, was torn in two so that all who believe become a kingdom of priests unto God (Rev. 1:5-6). Through Christ we've been given access to draw near to God's throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

This is why Paul humbly and confidently proclaimed, "*But by the grace of God I am what I am.*" In other words, Paul is saying, I am the man that I am today because I am being transformed by the marvelous grace of God.

But now, although Paul was saved by the grace of God, God's grace in Paul's life never became a license to sin or an excuse to be lazy. Paul continues: *and his grace toward me was not in vain* (v.10). In other words, God's grace was not wasted on Paul. As Paul explained: "*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*" (v. 10-11).

Notice that the reason Paul worked harder than even the other apostles to spread the gospel, wasn't because a spirit of competition or self-effort drove him. Paul was driven by the grace of God and the saving power of the gospel.

When Paul says concerning his hard work, "*though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*" (v.10), he is speaking of more than just the favor of God. The Greek word translated as grace can also mean a gift. All of God's gifts reflect His grace. In fact, grace itself is also a gift. And the greatest gift of His grace is the gift of Himself—to know the manifest presence and power of God in our lives so that we might live the Christian life and serve His Kingdom. This is what Paul meant when he testified that He worked harder than others because the grace of God was *with him* (1 Cor. 15:10).

Brothers and sisters, the marvelous grace of God given to us at Christ's expense should compel us to give our best efforts in service to Him. How many of you know, as God's grace accomplished our salvation, God's grace is with us to accomplish the work that He calls us to do for Him. "The Christian life is a life of grace from beginning to end. We enter it by grace, live it by grace, and receive rewards at the end by grace." John Koessler

Maybe you're here and you desire to serve the cause of Christ, but struggle to find the motivation. Can I tell you, the answer is not trying to exert yourself more. The answer is not pulling yourself up by your boot straps. The answer is to look away from yourself and look unto Jesus the author and perfecter of your faith.

Conclusion

The gospel is not only the good news that Christ accomplished salvation for us, but knowing Him in and through the gospel is our salvation. And in addition to relishing the glory of His saving grace, we must continue to rely on His power within through prayer and obedience so that we might serve Him with grace filled efforts and excellence.

May the gospel of the grace of God, which is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe, transform us daily as we look away from ourselves to Christ, and also compel us to give our all to Jesus, who gave His all for us, in reliance on His grace and to the glory of His name.

