

1 Corinthians 15:1-19 The Center of the Gospel

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If someone were to ask you: what's the central message of the gospel? How would you respond? If they asked for the elevator briefing equivalent – what would you say? Which aspects of the Bible would you point out? Would you talk about Jesus, and if so, what about Him would you share?

This morning we're going to look at 1 Corinthians Chapter 15 and we'll find what some people refer to as the core of the gospel. Let's jump right in and see what we find:

1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. 7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. 8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

Here's that core of the gospel we were talking about – Paul is condensing all of Christianity to this tight little package as he reviews the essence of the message he brought to Corinth when the church was started there. There are several things we'll want to notice here, all of them surprising to various degrees.

First of all, notice the method by which the gospel advances. Paul says he's just reminding them of what he has already preached in Corinth. They are being saved by a message that came to Paul, he received it, then he passed it on and those who received it from him will continue passing it on. It's like an email that just keeps getting forwarded along.

We need to make note of that, because if we want to see people saved, if we want to see people who are not Christians become Christians, if we want to see people destined for hell saved from hell, then we need to tell them the gospel. We need to forward the message along.

God could just text us with a message including all the details of how to be saved. He could have an angel show up at everyone's 12th birthday party and pull us off to the side and explain the gospel – sort of a rite of passage. He could appear to each of us in a dream and tell us how to be saved. But He doesn't. God has, for reasons we don't completely

understand, ordained preaching as the method by which the gospel is communicated. He wants the message of salvation to pass from one human being to another.

Now, when I say preaching, that doesn't mean just standing in a pulpit – anyone can preach the gospel. The word in Greek is *euaggelizōi* which will sound familiar to any of you Bible students because it's so similar to *euangellion* – which is the Greek word for the gospel and is where we get our English word for evangelize. So to preach is simply to be the herald of good news – to spread good news, to evangelize.

And we evangelize people all the time – oh, not about spiritual issues. We're usually too shy about that. No, instead we evangelize about the new restaurant we've found, or about the trade that our favorite sports team just made, or even about some book we've just read or movie we've seen or app we've found. We tell people the good news of how our lives just got better and theirs can too...unless it has anything to do with eternity, that's taboo.

And yet, this is the way God wants the gospel to be spread. He wants us to tell other people. He wants to use us! The greatest thing that could happen to someone is to have their sins forgiven and for them to receive eternal life and God allows US to be a part of that...if we are willing to receive the message, believe the message and pass the message along.

Second, notice that this is the message [which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.](#)

So, just because you hear the message doesn't mean you've been saved. Just because you went to church on Sunday and someone explained it and you understood what they were saying, that doesn't mean you're saved. Just because you know the plot and the terms, just because you get the big idea, that doesn't mean you're saved. No, we're saved if we receive the good news, stand in the good news and hold fast to the good news. It's possible to believe in vain.

And so, as your pastor, I must urge you – look at your life. Are you standing on the gospel? Is it your hope? What difference has the gospel made in your life? Can you point to specific changes that have occurred, or that are occurring as a result of receiving this good news? The Bible talks about it as fruit – any healthy fruit tree will naturally bear fruit. It's just what it does, it's just what happens, in fact the Bible points out that we know a tree by it's fruit. Just wait till summer or fall and see what grows or what falls off the tree – you'll know what kind of tree it is. Is the same true with you? Are changes being produced in your life? Are you holding fast? It's a question we must ask because we find it right here in Scripture.

We find it in other places too – we see people who heard Jesus speaking, or saw Him working miracles and they came and they liked it, it wasn't annoying, it wasn't vulgar, it was very inspirational, and so they liked what they heard. But they didn't like everything. And when other bits came out, bits that were harder to swallow, bits that spoke about them actually having to give something up for the sake of God, they walked away. They had

believed in vain. It wasn't a saving belief; it was just sort of an agreement about the things they liked. They were OK dating Jesus, but as soon as they had their first fight, they broke up and never called Him again.

It's possible that the same is true for someone listening right now. Are you sure you're saved? Why not talk to God about it, ask Him for assurance. He'll give it to you. He doesn't want us to be always afraid of whether we've done it right, whether we're really saved or not. And I don't want to put you under some sort of a trip, but the Scripture very clearly warns us – it's possible to get close to salvation but not really be in salvation. Are you in? Struggle with that question, and if you have any concerns, talk with me, but don't be one who believes in vain.

Here's the essence of what you need to know - [that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.](#) And the passage goes on to list many other witnesses.

Which brings us to our third observation, the most shocking of them all – it's that this is the core message. Jesus did all kinds of other things – He did miracles. He fed the hungry. He healed the blind, the sick; He even raised people from the dead. He preached great sermons. He helped the poor and powerless, He stood up to all kinds of political and religious leaders. But none of that is the central message of the gospel. This is.

[“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day”](#) and it was all seen it by witnesses.

Now, you can go in all sorts of directions from there. Ask, well, who was Jesus? The answer: He was fully God and fully man. He was God's own Son, the second member of the Trinity.

How did He die? On a Roman cross outside Jerusalem right before the Passover feast.

When did He die? Somewhere around 32-33AD.

What is sin? Doing what we want to do instead of what God commands – so there are sins of commission – things we do that we shouldn't do, and sins of omission, things that we should do but we don't do.

What did the Scriptures say? The Scriptures tell the story of how God made the world perfect and everything in it, but that He also gave human beings choice and our first ancestors used that choice to turn against Him. But, instead of just smashing the whole human race and starting from scratch, God decided, in His mercy, to undertake a plan to save us - a plan that would satisfy His need for justice since we had done wrong, but that would also allow for Him to show mercy. So, the Scriptures tell the story of how God worked through real men and women, in real places, on real days in history to eventually bring His Son, Jesus, to earth as the Messiah, the promised one who would bring salvation.

His death occurred because He was our sacrifice – it was the suffering that was necessary to fulfill justice. But the fact that He suffered for those sins means we don't have too, and therefore God's mercy triumphs over justice.

And the Scriptures contain many, many, other details of God's plan and Jesus filled all of them.

But once again, *this* is the central message of the gospel – Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. The gospel isn't primarily about us getting a job, or keeping our job, or finding a spouse, or healing our aunt's pneumonia, or helping us find a parking space. God *might* do any of things, but He has *definitely* paid the price for our sin through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son. It's fine to ask for lesser things, but do we realize the value of what we already have?

All of our sins can be forgiven! Everything from the little white lie to the adulterous scandal, to the way you hit your son, the way you stole from your family, the things you said, the things you're thinking. No matter how devious, how debauched, how depraved, every sin can be forgiven because Jesus has made a way. If He wasn't good enough, if His sacrifice wasn't big enough, God would not have raised Him from the dead. But He was, and it was, because He wasn't just a man He is also God Himself and you're not. You're not God. You're not big enough, bad enough, or messed up enough to make a mess He can't clean.

I like to read, my wife isn't into it so much. So, I often read to her – that way we can both share the stories. And frequently, while I read, she'll do something mindless like play solitaire. Well, she's been playing this one round of spider solitaire for months now, she just keeps coming back to it because she hasn't been able to solve it. Now, the programmers who built the thing know that sometimes people will need help to see what move to make next, so they've built in a hint feature. The problem is by the time Mady needs the hint she's already too deep into the cards and there's no workable solution that will actually end the game. So, I've been telling her that she needs to just start clicking the hint button from the very first card and systematically work her way through it and see if she can find a solution that way. But she's not ready to do that yet, she wants to keep working on it and see if she can figure it out on her own.

Here's my point - some problems are hard to solve, but that just makes them more attractive to people who love working on problems. Being more difficult, more complex, doesn't make them want to cast the problem aside, it means this puzzle is get even more of their attention.

And that is true of you and your sin. You might be a real piece of work. You might be a seriously complex puzzle, but all that means is that God is going to spend even more time working on you. And unlike my wife, He doesn't need any hints – He knows all the right moves to make and in what order to make them, and He's not going to be stumped. You're

not God's kryptonite. So bring Him all of your messes, all your regrets, all your stupidity, your selfishness and your sin, and let Him have His way with you.

That's a message Paul, the man writing all of this, clearly understood:

9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy 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; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God *which was with me*. 11 Therefore, whether *it was I or they*, so we preach and so you believed.

Paul was not one Jesus' original followers. Guys like Peter, James, and John – other apostles – they had been around from the very beginning. They had spent years with Jesus as He walked this earth during His ministry. Paul on the other hand was a part of the religious establishment, the people that Jesus was always trying to correct. So after Jesus died and the Holy Spirit came and thousands upon thousands of people in Jerusalem and elsewhere began demonstrating real change as a result of being saved by the gospel, Paul was part of the group that tried to put a stop to everything.

Paul wasn't just the guy at work who mocked Christians. He wasn't just the guy who thought science and logic had all the answers. He didn't just have a Darwin fish on the back of his chariot. No, Paul actually went to places where they were putting Christians to death to see if he could help out. He went around as part of a religious police unit that tracked believers down and threw them in jail. He got a letter from the chief priests allowing him to go all the way over to Damascus, in Syria, to track Christians down and snuff out this little 'cult' before they got established anywhere else.

But while he was headed up there Jesus confronted him – he had a radical encounter with the risen Lord and it changed everything about his life. This is what he's referring to when he says he is the least of the apostles because he had actually persecuted the church. And yet, even that wasn't too much of a sin for God to forgive. In fact, God didn't just forgive for what he had done, God used him to do even greater works for the sake of the gospel – God took all his energy, all his zeal, all his enthusiasm and put it to work for the sake of the lost.

God showed Paul grace. And as a result, Paul labored more abundantly than anyone else. Not because he felt like he had to prove himself to God, not because he needed to work off his debt, but because he was so grateful, so thankful, so radically changed by this message.

And once again, after he received the good news of the change and forgiveness that is possible in Christ, he shared that good news with the people of Corinth, and anyone else who would listen.

Is there any good news in your life? Is there any transformation? Any change? Anything you can share with others to give them hope and glorify your savior? Think about that? And marvel again about the fact that God wants to save people and He wants to use you to do to it. Big people and little people, one on one and through crowds, overseas and in your

home, God wants to work in other people's lives – even in dirty, desperate, despised sinners and turn them upside down for eternity – and he wants to do it through you.

But, just like today, there were some back in Corinth who didn't want to receive that message, so Paul had to explain it a little more:

12 Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. 14 And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching *is* empty and your faith *is* also empty. 15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. 16 For if *the* dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith *is* futile; you are still in your sins! 18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

We're going to spend more time looking at the realities of the resurrection in our next study, but for now, I just want to make sure we understand how much is at stake. If this isn't true, if Jesus did not really rise from the dead, then there is no hope for those who have died already, and there is no hope for us. "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable."

But it's even worse than that – not only have we been fools, we've been liars. "False witnesses of God" the Scriptures say. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then the whole thing is a sham.

All of this brings us right back to our shocking observation that this is the center of the gospel – the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

If He didn't die and if He didn't rise, then nothing else He did matters. Think about that. No, really, really, think about that. It's not just about the stories He told, the sermons He preached, the ethics He developed. It's not about the people He healed or the people He fed or the example He set. None of those things were as essential as His death, burial, and resurrection! If that falls apart, EVERYTHING else falls apart with it. You can't have a Jesus who didn't die and rise again.

People have always wanted to strip away the parts of Jesus that they like and use Him for their own purposes. But you can't do that. There are parts that are essential to the whole, parts that are essential for HIS purpose – and that purpose was to save us from our sins. Jesus didn't just come to make our lives better, to make us middle-class, to make us popular with our neighbors or our friends, He came to conquer the sin that was separating us from God.

We must remember that our Savior's death wasn't an accident; it served a purpose – an essential purpose – it dealt with a puzzle we could never solve on our own, because it involved us and our rebellion against God.

On the cross God took our rebellion on Himself. He paid a debt He did not owe because we owed a debt we could not pay. It was the ultimate act of love. He has endured centuries and centuries of rebellion and selfishness from men, and He has been long suffering, patient through it all. And then at some point in each of our lives, He sends someone our way to tell us this gospel, to help us understand the way to forgiveness.

You've heard about it today and it's my sincere and fervent prayer that it is making a difference in your life. That you're not believing in vain, but you're standing firm in this message, holding fast to this message, and sharing this message with others because no matter who you are, no matter how great your sin, this is God's even greater gift to you.