



## What is the Gospel?

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

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It seems appropriate that as we begin the new Church Year, that we come to the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, because as St. Paul closes out his letter to this church that had gone astray, he focuses in on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that means for his people – how we are to see ourselves as Christians, how we are to live as Christians, and how we are to interact with others as Christians – because of the resurrection. St. Paul takes us back to the basics of the gospel and what it means to have new life in Christ.

The Corinthians weren't the only ones to get the gospel wrong. It's always been a problem and I'm sure it always will be. As I talk with people as a priest, it's pretty common that the conversation turns to faith and to the gospel. I'm indebted to James Kennedy's *Evangelism Explosion* programme for what they call their evangelistic "diagnostic questions". They're two questions meant to immediately determine whether or not someone understands the gospel. The first question asks if the person is confident that if he died today, that he would arrive in heaven. And the second question then follows asking on what grounds God should admit him to heaven.

Almost everyone is sure that if he died today, he'd go to heaven. But when I ask on what grounds God would admit them to heaven, pretty much just as many people claim admission to heaven based on their good works. What's really sad is that most of the people who end up talking to me are people who learned that false gospel of works in a church of some kind. One young lady I spoke with a couple of years ago stands out in my memory. She had been raised in an Episcopal church, but she quit going when she left home because she wasn't finding any hope there – only guilt. She heard a lot about Jesus, but she never heard the gospel. She only heard that he came as an example for us to follow. She heard the message, "love God

and your neighbour," but never anything more than that. When I asked her what the word "gospel" meant to her she said that it was about being a good person. I asked how Jesus worked into that and all she could say was that he was one of many examples of do-gooders we should imitate. She left the church because she didn't see any point in it. She knew she couldn't live up to the standard of Jesus and hearing about that standard just made her feel guilty. And yet in that church she never heard about sin or about holiness and so she also just assumed that as long as her good deeds outweighed her bad, then somehow she'd be "okay" in the end. In the end she became a nominal Rastafarian. As she said, the message about doing good was basically the same but without any hypocrisy – plus the dreads, the music, and the pot were much cooler expressions of faith than Holy Baptism or Holy Communion.

There are plenty of churches you could drop into this morning and hear the gospel preached as little or nothing more than following the example of Jesus (or Mohammed or Ghandi or Buddha or Mother Theresa). But that's do-gooderism. It won't save you. It's nothing more than salvation by works and it ignores the most important thing that makes Christianity different from every other religion in the world. It's the "social gospel." There are other churches in town where you could hear about how God wants nothing more than to make you healthy and wealthy and that the end result of faith is the "good life" – not a good life with any eternal perspective, but the good life *here and now* in totally worldly terms. But again, that's not the gospel. It's a heresy that turns Jesus into nothing more than your ticket to the show. It's a religion that's all about what's in it for me. It's a religion with no eternal perspective. There are a host of false gospels out there that lead people astray, that leave them disillusioned, or worse, that leave them with a false sense of security in salvation as they traipse down the wide and easy way that leads to destruction.

In Corinth their particular problem had to do with the resurrection. We've seen Paul touching on this throughout his letter. Remember how they were so enamoured of worldly teaching and wisdom? They had brought some ideas from Greek philosophy into their gospel and corrupted it. They had accepted the idea that the

body was bad and the spirit was good and thus they had rejected the idea of a literal and physical resurrection. Why would God resurrect to new life a body that was evil? And so the mark of their spirituality was to live like the body didn't matter, but in doing that they undermined the very gospel itself. But Paul understood that what we believe *really does matter*. It's not enough to be sincere. You have to be sincere about God's *truth* – about right doctrine – because the eternal destination of your soul is at stake here. Look at verses 1-2:

**Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain.**

Paul stresses the importance of the gospel message. It was the foundation of their church. It's what Paul had come to Corinth as a missionary and preached to them. It was what they stood on. It was the very message by which they were saved. And yet there's a stern warning here. It's the message by which they were saved, *assuming* they were holding fast to it – sticking with it. Paul raises the possibility that they might have believed in vain – that they never really truly believed in the first place or that they've since corrupted the saving message into a false gospel that has no power to save.

It's become popular today to throw around slogans like "doctrine divides" or "no creed but Christ" and yet St. Paul stresses here that the gospel is something specific and that to stray from it means that we cease to be Christian. Doctrine is *vital* important. Creeds are important. The Early Church understood that and that's how we got our creeds – because they knew that mere belief in a vague nation of Jesus doesn't save anyone and that, in fact, we can (and many have) placed their faith in false conceptions of Christ and in false understandings of the gospel message with the result that their souls were lost to everlasting damnation. That's why it's *critical* that we take doctrine seriously and that we get the gospel right. Paul goes on to spell it out:

**For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried,**

**that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.**

First, this is the message that Jesus gave to Paul. It's a message that's of first importance. If they don't get this right, nothing else matters. And that message is, first, that Jesus Christ died for our sins. That in accordance with the Old Testament scriptures – in accordance with the hope that God gave his people going all the way back to Adam and Eve that he would provide a means of redemption from the death brought by their sins – that in accordance with that, Jesus Christ came. God became man. The Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity, condescended to our level, giving up his status and prestige, and became one of us. And in becoming one of us he became the new Adam – our new representative. But where Adam and every one of his children failed and fell into sin, Jesus lived in perfect obedience to the standard of holiness that God established in his Law. He was perfect. He was the only man who ever lived who didn't deserve eternal damnation, eternal destruction, eternal death, eternal life apart from God. And yet as our representative, he took our sins on himself and he died the death that we deserve. In his death he satisfied God's justice.

As St. Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). It was just as Isaiah had prophesied half a millennium before when he wrote, "But *he* was wounded for *our* transgressions; *he* was crushed for *our* iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with *his* stripes *we* are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

All we have to do is turn to him in faith – faith that he is the God he claimed to be and that his sacrifice for sin is enough to satisfy the just wrath of God against sin. But that means acknowledging that we are sinners – that we are corrupt to the core, that nothing we do on our own power is good (that even the best things we do are tainted by sinful motives), because it's only then that we can fully trust in the death of Christ for our sins.

It's popular today to say that we shouldn't talk about sin, because it makes people feel bad about themselves. But, brothers and sisters, if we don't understand the sinfulness of our sin, then we'll never

understand our need for a redeemer. That was the problem the young woman I met a few years ago had. It's the problem that most people I talk to have. They don't truly believe that they're sinners, or if they admit their sin, they fail to understand just how bad it is. They think that their good deeds will somehow outweigh the bad or they think that God will somehow grade on a curve. But Scripture tells us that God's standard of holiness is perfect. The point of the Law that God gave through Moses was to show men and women that they could never meet God's perfect standard – to show them that someone else had to do it for them. Paul says in Romans 3 that "None is righteous, no, not one." Not *even* one. But we forget that. Remember the rich young ruler who ran up to Jesus asking, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered his question, but before he did he saw an even deeper problem. This guy didn't know who Jesus was. He didn't understand that Jesus was God's Son and that he was living the perfect life that none of us can lead. No, when he ran up to Jesus and addressed him as "good teacher" he was doing what so many people in the world do when they talk about "holy men" or "holy people". It's scary to me that I can put on this clerical collar and immediately people assume that I'm a "good teacher" or a "holy man" and essentially sinless. People talk about their Christian friends as "good people" as if we're sinless because we're Christians. And people make these assumptions because they don't understand the sinfulness of sin. They don't understand that every one of us is a sinner. And so Jesus first said to the young man, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." There's no one who doesn't need the Saviour. And people won't know that unless we preach that we're all sinners.

But Paul says that Jesus not only died, but that he was buried. It's enough that he died to satisfy God's wrath, and yet ever week when we say the Creed we recall as a fundamental part of our faith that he was buried. Why? Because if Jesus' death was necessary to pay the penalty for our sins, his burial is the proof that he really did die. They didn't issue death certificates in the ancient world. There was no doctor to take a pulse and certify death happened at such and such an hour. Burial was the certification that death had

really happened. Some people claimed (and still do claim) that Jesus only swooned or fell into a coma and woke up three days later. And yet don't you think that when the disciples took him off the cross and prepared him for burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb that they weren't looking for signs of life? Would they have embalmed him and wrapped him in burial clothes and left him sealed in the tomb if they'd felt a pulse or even a faint breath?

Friends, if Jesus didn't die, we have no hope. His burial is the first proof that we do have hope. But there's a second and even greater proof for our hope. Paul also says, "he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." Again, in his death Jesus satisfied the just wrath of God against sin. His burial proves he died, but since only a perfect sacrifice could satisfy God, how do we know that Christ was that perfect sacrifice? How do we know that Jesus wasn't just another guy – a do-gooder and compared to most people *relatively* good – who died? We know because his Father resurrected him and he rose from that grave. His resurrection is the second certification of our hope. His burial proves he really made the sacrifice as he died, but his resurrection proves that he was the one who could make that sacrifice – that he wasn't just some guy who died. And because Jesus conquered sin and death and rose again, we have confidence that through faith in his sacrifice, we too will one day be raised from death to life.

Then Paul goes on, as if to say, "You want proof that all this happened? Here it is:"

**...he appeared to Cephas [that's Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 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. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (1 Corinthians 15:5-11)**

If Jesus' resurrection is the proof that he is who he claimed to be and that his sacrifice is truly saving, here's the proof that his resurrection was real. Paul reminds the Corinthians that Jesus appeared first to Peter, then the other disciples saw him at various points in time – in fact, more than five hundred different people all saw him during the forty days between his resurrection and ascension. He appeared to James too and then Paul says he appeared to the whole group of apostles together, probably to commission them as his apostles. Paul's saying, it's not just me, you can ask these other people. Some of them had presumably been in Corinth – like Peter. And Paul singles out Peter for a reason. Remember at the beginning how the Corinthians were splitting up into parties. They rejected Paul, but they were devoted to Peter and Apollos. Paul's saying here, don't appeal to Peter for your goofy theology of the resurrection. You say you follow Peter. He was there too. He saw Jesus!

And the same resurrected Christ came to Paul too. Paul refers to himself as one "untimely born" – literally the word means an abortion. It's probably something the Corinthians had taken to calling him as a nasty name that referred to his small stature and grotesque appearance. And yet God is no respecter of persons. The resurrected Christ appeared to Paul too, commissioning him as an apostle. Jesus didn't come to him as an apparition. From Paul's writings we know that when Jesus met him on the Damascus Road he came in the flesh just as he did to the other apostles. These witnesses were the proof of their hope and they continue to be so today for us.

But Paul can't help but remind them of the graciousness of the gospel. Christ came to him, abortion or freak that he was, and more importantly as the great sinner that he was. The other apostles had been devoted followers of Jesus. Maybe Peter had denied Christ three times, but he immediately repented and continued as the leader of the group. But Paul, he had been the chief and most zealous of the early church's persecutors, hunting down her members and handing them over to the Sanhedrin for trial. He held the coats of the men who stoned Stephen to death so they wouldn't be encumbered as they threw their rocks at the first martyr for

Christ. And he was on his way to hunt down Christians in Damascus when Christ got hold him and gave him a taste of grace. Paul didn't deserve redemption, but God chose to offer it to him anyway, and if God can offer his grace to Paul he certainly can to us. *The key is that we recognise our unrighteousness and need for a Saviour.* This is the message we come to celebrate in worship every Sunday morning. And if somehow you've missed the message, you need to do some thinking on it this week – remembering that no one finds salvation on his or her own merit, but only as they humble come to Christ, admitting their own sin and their own inadequacy, and then trusting him to do it for them – trusting that his sacrificial death is the only route to God.

It's not without reason that the Church's lectionary has combined this lesson with Jesus' parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity. You'll remember the story Jesus told of the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. He went to the front and loudly prayed, "I thank you God that I'm not a sinner like these other men...especially like this dirt-bag tax collector." In contrast the tax collector knelt in the back, striking his chest in penitence and simply prayed, not even lifting his eyes to heaven, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

You see, that Pharisees had no need of a Saviour – or so he thought. That was the whole problem with the Pharisees. They'd taken God's law and manipulated it until they'd come up with a code of rules that they could obey. It certainly wasn't easy, but they could do it. And in doing that they'd forgotten that the real purpose of the law was to show us God's holiness and our own sinfulness – our inability to meet his standard. The Pharisees simply reduced the standard from perfection to something they could achieve and then became self-righteous about. And that Pharisees in the parable was as self-righteous as they come. And yet the poor tax collector came to God with no delusions of righteousness. He came humbly. He confessed his sins. And he asked for mercy. If we truly understand our sinfulness that's all we can do. A man who knows he's a sinner and who knows and understands the holiness of God knows that his only hope of

escaping damnation is to fall on his face and beg for God's mercy.

Jesus said at the end of the parable that it was the humble tax collector who went home justified – who went home having been declared righteous – not the self-righteous tax collector who trusted in his own works. Friends that's the gospel: that Jesus Christ died to save sinful men and women from their sins, that he was buried, and that he rose again on the third day. No one has any right to add to that. No one has any right to change it. And if we confuse it with anything else, we do so to our own eternal peril. If you've already received this gospel and taken it to heart your worship this morning springs from the knowledge that God loves you and has been gracious and merciful, even though you're a sinner and were once his enemy. If somehow this is the first time you've heard it, or if you've heard it before but haven't been willing to admit your sin and humbly trust in the perfect work of Christ on the cross – to have faith in him instead of yourself – you need to take some time to think consider what God's message of grace means for you.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your saving grace – that while we were yet sinners, you gave your Son to be a sacrifice for our sins. Thank you that he came, that he died, that he was buried, and that he rose again in victory over sin and death that he might raise us to new life too. But remind us that we have no claim in your gospel of hope as long as we trust in ourselves and as long as we think we can merit heaven on our own. Father, keep us humble that we might always lean on you – our help and our strength – and never forget to give you all praise and glory. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.