

Sermon Series - The Weak, Foolish, and Victorious Gospel
Sermon Text and Title - 1 Corinthians 15:3-11: Of First Importance

Sermon Points:

Introduction: Of First Importance (v.3)

Gospel Proof in Scripture (vv.3-4)

Gospel Proof in Appearances (vv.5-8)

Gospel Proof in Changed Lives (vv.9-10)

Application: Gospel Focus and Fuel (v.11)

Corporate Prayer:

Lord, would you help us always keep the gospel before our eyes as the reality of most importance. Help us remember your death and resurrection. Help us remember we are united to you in your death to sin and your resurrection life. Let it saturate every nook and cranny of our heads and hearts. Let your blood-bought grace not be in vain, but help it fuel us to work hard for the sake of your name.

Introduction: Of First Importance (v.3)

Paul starts our passage this morning with these words:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.

And we know from verses 1-2 last week that he's talking about the gospel. And we see in this verse and verse 11 that this gospel doesn't change. Paul received it and Paul passed it on. Verse 11 says, no matter who is preaching, they preach the same message and that is what is believed. There's no shifting with the gospel message of the death and resurrection of Jesus. And this gospel is of first importance.

The Corinthians were sidetracked by all sorts of other social, political, sexual, and even theological desires. Who knew the most popular preachers. Who had the most knowledge. How much sin they could away with because of grace. They sued each other to keep their material rights rather than suffer like Christ. They engaged in all sorts of sexual immorality saying their bodies didn't matter because they were "spiritual." They had "communion services" that only the rich were invited to. They disrespected, distracted, and divided each other in their worship services over order and whose spiritual gift made them the best.

They were always lifting themselves up to push others down to make themselves look good.

To Paul, it seemed like the gospel had become kind of background noise for the Corinthians. Something that was not the main point of their lives and was easy to tune out. And therefore, the gospel that sat in the background, not having much influence on their lives or their decisions or their relationships.

So, how do you heal relationships and call a messed up people to repentance all at once? You remind them of the gospel. Why do you do that?

Because, last week Paul reminded them that this gospel their everything. They received the gospel by grace; becoming children of God. They stood in the gospel by grace; daily dependent on the gospel for their very lives and perseverance. And they were being saved by grace; God would complete the work he started in them until the day they see him face to face if they simply held fast by faith.

And so to begin to bring about repentance and to bring about healing amidst the Corinthians Paul simply wants to remind them what they heard, what they believed, and that it is very, very real. He wants to move the gospel out of the realm of philosophical discussion and back into the concrete realm of historical reality they've been saved by.

And he wants to do this because if we keep the gospel as the reality of "first importance" we will always feel ourselves to be the greatest of sinners who have been saved by the greatest Savior. We will be quick to examine our hearts for sin because we know how desperately wicked they are and quick to extend forgiveness to others because we've tasted the sweetness of forgiveness.

It just needs to be said so clearly: our jobs are not of first importance, a promotion is not of first important, popularity is not of first importance, political allegiance is not of first importance, our grudges and hurts are not of first importance, our suffering is not of first importance, our comforts and safety are not of first importance, church activities are not of first importance, and even our families are not of first importance.

It is so easy to get distracted and make the gospel background noise. And suddenly we'll find ourselves thinking very little of Christ and acting very little like Christ.

Our identity is in this gospel, and our lives are first and foremost about knowing this gospel and making it known everywhere we are. And when we do that first, we can love our families well, we can serve the church well, we can reach out to the world well, and we can live lives that honor Jesus as our great Savior in all other areas. The Corinthians needed this reminder and we need this reminder.

Gospel Proof in Scripture (vv.3-4)

So now Paul's just going to unpack once again the concrete realities of this gospel to remind their hearts that this almost unthinkable reality really happened.

In other words, Paul is giving them some gospel proof to bring the gospel back to the main song of their life instead of the background noise it had become. Look at verses 3-4:

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.

The reason this gospel is "of first importance" is because in the gospel we are saved from our sins and brought to God. We see this first in the death of Christ. "Christ died *for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures." Notice how Paul makes it personal. He doesn't here just say that Christ died for sins as if he's proving a theological point. But, he says to the Corinthians, remember, of first importance that Christ died for **our** sins.

Our sins were arrogant treason against a holy God. Our sins were going to earn us a just, eternal death. Our sins were blinding us to run a hell-bound race indifferent to the cross. Our sins were what held us guilty in the courtroom before God.

But, Christ died on our behalf. Christ took our place. Christ took our punishment. Christ reconciled us to God. Christ was our worthy sacrifice. The blood of Christ purchased us and brought us into the family. And Paul says, remember, this was simply what God said he would do all along in the Scriptures. There are so many places we could go to see the death of Christ predicted. Jesus himself said that the Scriptures foretold his death for sins. But, let's just go to Isaiah 53:5-6 for now to see one. Here the prophet Isaiah is predicting the fate of the Suffering Servant who will come to save the people of God:

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

God had planned this all along, in fact in verse 10 of Isaiah 53 it says, "It was the pleasure of the LORD to crush him." Christ died for our sins, just like the Scriptures predicted he would, proof that this is God's secure, unchanging, and merciful plan of redemption for sinners.

Paul then emphasizes that Jesus was buried. In other words, from the gospel accounts, from the eyewitnesses, we know Jesus actually died. He was actually laid in a tomb. He wasn't faking it. He had a big rock and lots of guards to watch him. The burial serves as confirmation of the death for sins.

Then Paul moves on to his next point of the gospel and the part that he'll focus on for the rest of the chapter.

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

Why does the resurrection matter? Look at 15:17:

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

The resurrection matters because if Christ has not been raised, then we are still in our sins. Jesus is not who he said he was and we have no hope. So again, the gospel is only truly and deeply good news for those who know that in this life our deepest problem is our sin, but Christ has died for our sins and been raised to show that he indeed is who he said he was and is a worthy sacrifice for sin.

Where does the Old Testament talk about the resurrection of Jesus? Well, a few places, but we don't need to look further than Isaiah 53:10-11:

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

So, this suffering Servant who will be crushed and make an offering for guilt will also "have his days prolonged," and out of his anguish shall "see and be satisfied" by the offspring his death purchases. In other words, he will live again! Yes, he died, but then he's raised to life, sees what his work has accomplished, and rejoices in the satisfaction of bringing many sons and daughters to his Father as part of the blood-bought family of God.

So, Paul is simply proving that this great salvation has been predicted, has been prophesied, and has been fulfilled in Christ. Paul is showing these things of first importance that God himself planned and carried out.

The Bible is an amazing book that is great proof in itself that we can trust the gospel, because there is no other book with this consistency and this unified story. And that is good news for sinners in need of a trustworthy Savior.

Gospel Proof in Appearances (vv.4-8)

Just like the burial is proof of the death of Jesus, so the appearances of Jesus are proof of the resurrection of Jesus and Paul spends the majority of his verses here because the resurrection is his main focus in chapter 15.

You see, for almost all the problems the Corinthians had been facing up to this point in the book, the main way Paul addressed them was by reminding them of the self-giving love of Jesus in the gospel when he died on the cross. In other words, if the Corinthians would see the death of Christ, and the Spirit would make that humble, self-giving mind come alive in them, the issues could be resolved.

However, in chapter 15, what Paul is fighting against is an idea that had crept into the Corinthians mind that "there is no resurrection" of the body.

Let me explain what is going on here. The people of Corinth were deeply influenced by their culture; we see that all over this book. One thing that was a part of Greek culture at that time was philosophy. And in their

philosophical system it was impossible for a mortal body, full of weakness and corruption, to then be immortal in eternity. For them, the options were either that you were annihilated at death or your spirit left without your body.

They are saying that it is impossible for a body like the one you and I have in this room today to be raised from the dead. Some apparently were even beginning to doubt the resurrection of Christ's real body and perhaps saying it was just his spirit.

But in doing this, they are leaving the tradition that has been preached and dabbling in philosophy instead of listening to the apostles. So, why is it so dangerous for them to believe there is no resurrection of human bodies?

Well it's dangerous theologically and practically. It's dangerous theologically because if they stop believing in the resurrection, then they will ultimately throw away the gospel and show that they were never truly saved. And it's dangerous practically, because as we will see, when you are convinced your body isn't going with you, you begin to think that you can separate the physical from the spiritual and you begin to think you can do whatever you want with your body now as long as you believe, because you'll simply leave it behind.

When you begin to divorce the gospel from the actual body you live in, it is much more easy to divorce your behavior in that body from the gospel you believe. So, Paul sees it as really important theologically and practically that he helps them believe the resurrection of Christ and therefore the resurrection of their own bodies right, so that they don't throw away the gospel and so that they don't throw away lives saturated by the gospel.

And in verses 5-8 Paul wants to remind them that this part of the gospel is NOT up for philosophical speculation, but is a concrete, historical reality...most versions say that Jesus "appeared" to these people, but he word literally says he "was seen" by them, emphasizing that he was really before their eyes, read it with me:

And that he was seen by Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he was seen by more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he was seen also to me.

Paul appeals to the Corinthians with pretty great force here. Peter is still alive. James is still alive at the point he writes this. They are the authorities in the church, he is appealing to their authority with the Corinthians. He appeals to five hundred people who are almost all still alive. And then he begins to remind them of his own authority by reminding them that Jesus appeared to him as well.

We see these appearances recorded in Luke 24, Acts 1, and then Paul's vision on the Damascus Road in Acts 9.

Paul is reminding them of the proof of what they've believed, because if they lose it they will lose the gospel of first importance and will fall into all sorts of dangerous sinful behavior. He's reminding them of the concrete, sure evidence of the resurrection of the man Jesus Christ, so that they remember their bodies will indeed join him in the resurrection one day, that is the gospel they have believed, and that resurrection power should be at work in them now by the Spirit to cause them to want to use their bodies in ways that honor Jesus now in those bodies.

So, Paul has given proof of this gospel of first importance by showing the proof that it was God's plan all along in the Scriptures and by showing that Jesus was indeed raised and seen by many people in the flesh, including authoritative apostles like Peter, James, and Paul.

Gospel Proof in Changed Lives (vv.9-10)

Paul has one more proof to give them. The proof of what believing in the death and resurrection of Christ does to a really wicked person:

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.

Paul, in appealing to his authority as an apostle wants to make sure they understand that he has not earned his position, but he has much more authority when he speaks because all of it has been planned and accomplished by God's grace.

Paul says he is "the least" and "unworthy" to be called an apostle. Why? Because he persecuted the church of God. We know from Acts 7 that Paul was in charge of the stoning of Stephen. And listen to this description from Acts 8:3 of Paul:

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

Ravaging the church. Entering house after house. Dragging women and men to prison. Killing others. That's Acts 8. You know when Paul comes to know Jesus and begins preaching the gospel to others? Acts 9!

That's why Paul says "by the grace of God I am what I am." Paul knows his story cannot be separated from God's grace. Paul knows God saved by grace. Paul knows God transferred him from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of Jesus when he didn't deserve it. Paul knows that in the gospel "good things happen to bad people" because of Jesus.

This is all of our stories. We hated God. We were against him. We loved our sin. And God stopped us in our tracks, opened our eyes, and showed us Jesus and we were saved. By the grace of God we are what we are. But, notice, that this saving grace did not make Paul passive.

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.

Paul says, that God's grace didn't just save him and then leave him there. But, it made him a whole new creation. Remember Paul said the Corinthians were "being saved" by the gospel if they did not believe "in vain." Well, here Paul says Christians will work hard to proclaim the gospel if God's grace is not "in vain" toward them.

In other words, the same grace that takes wicked sinners and makes them children of God will take those same wicked sinners and make them preachers and workers for the gospel. Paul says God's grace put him to work for the sake of the gospel.

We should plan, and pray, and read, and share the gospel with friends, family, and co-workers. We should fight against sin. We should do all we can with our short lives to glorify God.

But, even as we do that, even as we work, we must remember that it only God's grace that is with us that is propelling us forward in that work. And it is only remembering and resting in God's grace in Christ that will give us the fuel to keep going. The grace that saves us in the gospel is the same grace that will fuel us to work for, live for and proclaim the gospel.

If you're alive and trusting in Christ today, God means for you to work hard for the sake of the gospel by his grace. This is what God does in the hearts of those who believe. He saves them by grace. And then he keeps transforming them by grace. The gospel they are saved by is so overwhelmingly sweet that they are transformed by it and want to keep working for it and passing it on to others. We don't work to appease God anymore; that is finished in Christ. We cannot earn our salvation. But, we by God's grace we are propelled to work to please God, because he is the only one we know who is worth living and working for until the day we see him face to face.

So, Paul has shown proof from the Scriptures, proof from the appearances of Jesus, and proof from a wicked persecutor of the church to a saved worker of the church, that the gospel is real, it can be trusted, and therefore is of first importance in every inch of their lives.

Application: Gospel Focus and Fuel (v.11)

So, what's the application? As those who have heard the gospel and believed it, the application from this particular passage is two-fold...let the gospel be your focus and let the gospel be your fuel.

The first application for us is to remind ourselves daily of the gospel. That Christ died *for our sins*. That he was buried and that he rose again to prove he was who he said he was and thus secure my salvation and deliver me from eternal death to eternal life simply by holding fast to him by faith. To wake up and have one of the first things I remember about myself is that I belong to Jesus. To wake up and remember that he paid for me with his blood. To wake up and look at the cross and immediately see the depth of my sin and the depth of his saving work on my behalf. To see the seriousness of my sin and to see the sweetness of his grace.

To wake up and remember that I'm not first a husband, daddy, or pastor, but I am first a child of God, saved by his death for my sins. To wake up and remind myself that I don't have to work for my salvation. I don't have to earn God's favor. I don't have to earn God's smile. He is always for me and always sees me as righteous in Christ. He will never leave me or forsake me and nothing can separate me from his love because of Jesus. And one day, I will rise with him and be with forever. I will rise and spend eternity enjoying his presence. One day, because of Jesus, sin the first enemy, and death, the final enemy will be conquered for me, because Jesus conquered it already, and I will spend eternity in true, full, unimaginable life with him.

And then the second application is to let me that gospel focus lead to fuel for your life. Let all the realities of the gospel saturate every inch of your life.

Let his deep forgiveness of you lead you to be quick to grant forgiveness even when it's hard.

Let the seriousness of sin cause you to come alongside others in their sin and want to help them fight it.

Let the sweetness of his salvation cause you to hate your own sin and run to him instead of run to sin.

Let the hope of the resurrection remind you that your body matters and that the resurrection power of God lives in you now by the Spirit of God so that there is great hope to fight sin and live a life pleasing to God. We have been united to his death to sin and we live in his resurrection power.

Let the gospel of first importance be your first allegiance above politics. Speak what the gospel says, not a particular political party.

Let the gospel saturate your family. Be a parent that is quick to forgive and quick to repent with your kids because of the gospel.

Let the gospel fuel you to love the hardest cases and in the hardest places.

Let the gospel fuel you to be hospitable and go out of your way to love others, even if they're people that have hurt you and caused you pain.

Let the gospel that has saved you be quick to be on your lips to others. Let the gospel that saved Paul in chapter 9 after he was persecuting the church in chapter 8 give you great hope to speak and great hope that no one is out of God's reach.

Let the gospel impact how you use your time, money, and gifts.

Let the gospel determine your priorities in life.

Let the gospel cause you to obey whatever Jesus calls you to do quickly and gladly because he is a trustworthy Master who has proven he wants what's best for you at the cross.

