



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 22: The Gospel & the Resurrection... 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I don't typically start off lessons reading transcripts from the CBS News Magazine Sixty Minutes but the next 342 words are just that. The story itself concerns Joel Osteen, the very popular pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. He is known for his television program and for his many books. The reporter's name in the manuscript is Byron Pitts and the theological professor called upon in the story as an expert on Christian doctrine and reflection is my old friend Michael Horton. I am picking reading up a few minutes into the interview and story where Pitt begins to ask Osteen some questions about his preaching and message. What I am reading is a transcript of the program.

But the real money for Osteen comes from his book sales, which are re-packaged versions of his sermons. His latest book, "Become a Better You," for which he reportedly got a \$13 million advance, debuted in October at number one on the New York Times bestseller list and is on the list today. The book lays out seven principles he believes will improve our lives.

"To become a better you, you must be positive towards yourself, develop better relationships, embrace the place where you are. Not one mention of God in that. Not one mention of Jesus Christ in that," Pitts remarks.

"That's just my message. There is scripture in there that backs it all up. But I feel like, Byron, I'm called to help people...how do we walk out the Christian life? How do we live it? And these are principles that can help you. I mean, there's a lot better people qualified to say, 'Here's a book that going to explain the scriptures to you.' I don't think that's my gifting," Osteen says.

But many theologians from mainstream churches find Osteen's message misleading and shallow.

"I think it's a cotton candy gospel," says Rev. Michael Horton, a professor of theology at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, Calif.

"His core message is God is nice, you're nice, be nice," Horton says, laughing. "It's sort of a, if it were a form of music, I think it would be easy listening. He uses the Bible like a fortune cookie. 'This is what's gonna happen for you. There's gonna be a windfall in your life tomorrow.' The Bible's not meant to be read that way."

Reverend Horton believes that Osteen tells only half the story of the Bible, focusing on the good news without talking about sin, suffering and redemption.

And Rev. Horton goes even further: he levels the harshest charge of all, calling the Osteen method of teaching heresy.

"It is certainly heresy, I believe, to say that God is our resource for getting our best life now," Horton says.

"Because?" Pitts asks.

"Well, it makes religion about us instead of about God," Horton explains.¹

Now the thing that I find most remarkable about that particular story on CBS News is that it has fallen to CBS News, not typically known for its theological conservatism or affection for either Christ's Church of His gospel, to highlight the fact that there is a lot going on in the evangelical world today that is radically disconnected from the historic proclamation of the gospel. Let me say that a different way. There is a lot of stuff out there in the evangelical world today that is

being referred or called the gospel that is not the gospel. In fact not only is it not the gospel, it is no more the gospel than is a bowl of Bluebell Buttered Almond ice cream is the gospel. What is being offered may lay easy on the palate and it may even be addictive but it is not the gospel and it will neither sustain nor prepare a person for eternity and it seems strange that Sixty Minutes is more apt to point that out than most Christian ministries.

You see, much of what is being presented as the gospel is simply pop psychology. It is a bunch of health and wealth nonsense and is a distraction to the church in the same way Mephistophilis' parading of the various devils in front of him was a distraction to Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*.² That is, it keeps the church from thinking about what really matters. It keeps the church from thinking about and from proclaiming the reality of sin, death and the grave. And it keeps the church from thinking about and addressing the greatest of all questions...which is, "What is the gospel and why does it really matter?"

I want to address both questions this morning not because I have any particular agenda but rather because those are the two things that come up in the text this morning in 1 Corinthians 15.

Now I am going to come to the text in a just a moment but before I do let me set up the importance of what is being discussed there by just making an historical observation or two.

In my thirty years or so of ministry I have had the privilege and responsibility of conducting quite a few funerals. I am not sure of exactly how many because I was

in the ministry quite a few years before it ever occurred to me to keep any sort of record or journal but I think it must be around fifty or sixty...maybe more. Over the years there have been two things that have always caught my attention...one is that people, intending to be nice, tend to say at viewings of the body of the deceased person, "My doesn't he or she look natural?"

I have always thought that was a strange thing to say. Now I understand what they mean...what they intend...but the answer, the real answer which I would never be impolite enough to say, is, "No, they do not look natural at all. In fact, they look about as unnatural as a person can be because they are dead. I knew them when they were alive and when they were alive they looked natural but right now laying there motionless and still and made up to soften the grim reality of death and they look anything but natural to me."

The other thing that always grabs my attention me at funerals is the depth of the hole into which they place the casket. You see, as a minister, you have to stand at the head of the casket at the graveside. I'm not sure why we do that. It is a tradition or simply an act of etiquette that has been established in the past...which we still hang on to today. Anyway, when you stand at the head of the casket...you are standing right near the edge of the hole...the hole into which the casket will eventually be lowered. When you stand there you can often see down into the hole...and the thing that grabs me is just how deep it is. I am not sure exactly how deep...we have a tradition that causes us to say its "six foot" as in "six-foot under" but I am not sure that is exactly right...but one thing I can say is that it is deep. Of course, the funeral home doesn't want you to see down in that hole...or perhaps they don't want anybody to fall down into the hole...so they cover it up. Usually there is plywood right up to the edge of the metal carrier that holds the coffin and

that plywood is covered over with green artificial grass but when you are standing there right by the edge of the hole doing a funeral you can see past the plywood and down into the hole and see the concrete liner that is down there...and the thought that always come to my mind is that when you put somebody down there...way down there...they are really and truly and completely dead.

Now I say that having ministered at the funeral of my grandmother and of mom and my dad. I say that having put beloved wife's grandfather and both grandmother's and mother in the ground. I say that having buried numerous aunts and uncles both on my side of the family and on my wife's side. I say that having buried a number of children. I say that having buried people who have committed suicide and having buried a number who were neglected and left to die alone. I say that having buried a number of people that I didn't know from Adam.

And I bring that up because every time I conduct a funeral, I find myself inextricably drawn to looking down into that hole...into the depths of that hole...and when I do I find myself drawn to the comfort of the gospel. You see my point is that the gospel addresses that hole as a problem...as the ultimate problem we all face. You see the gospel doesn't really focus on being a better dad or mother. It doesn't focus on being a better employee or student. It is doesn't focus on financial security or even being a better lover. I believe that when you understand and cling to the gospel you will, in fact, be all of those things...a better husband or wife or student or lover...but that fact is just incidental. You see the gospel addresses, rather plainly, the problem of sin and death...and you know when you think about it...that really is the greatest problem of all. It seems to me that if the church is going to strive to be pragmatic and useful it could do that by

simply addressing the biggest problem of all and that problem is the problem of sin, and of death and of the grave.

Let me illustrate what I mean.

I don't think I will ever forget one visit that I made to the hospital when an old friend of mine, a wonderful man named Ken Gregson found out he had terminal lung cancer, and called me to come and see him in the hospital. I had known Ken through my job working for a Christian bookstore chain. He had been the CEO and President of the parent corporation and was wonderfully generous and kind man to me and all the other employees. We all called him "pappy".

Anyway, he called me to come and see him because he wanted me to preach his funeral which he knew wasn't going to be very far away. I went to see him and we engaged in some small talk and I finally said, 'You know Ken, I feel a bit hesitant to bring it up. But in light of the fact that you know you are going to die would you mind if we talked about the gospel and the state of your soul?'

He smiled at me and said and I don't think I will ever forget his answer which went something like this, "Well you know Tom I didn't ask you here to talk about the weather."

We both laughed and from that point on we talked about the gospel and the importance of Christ's atonement for our sin. We talked about how God poured out the penalty for our sin upon Christ and how that when a person puts their trust in what Christ has accomplished on their behalf on the cross in redeeming them from their sins and in making them to be right with God they become a

Christian not on the basis of anything they have done but rather on the basis of what Christ has done for them. When we finished talking for about an hour or so later I said to him, "So let me ask you Ken, are you trusting in Christ and His atoning work right now for the forgiveness of your sins, to make you to be at peace with God and to one day resurrect your body from the grave and to unite it again with you spirit...so that you will live with Him from then on as a glorified saint for all eternity?"

Ken looked at me and smiled and said, "I have...I do and I am ready for whatever comes next."

Now I have to tell you that a week later when Ken died his confession of faith in Christ seemed imminently practical and relevant and I was grateful to God that we and not wasted our time together with just small talk.

Now I have done a bit of rambling but it is not unconnected from our passage for the morning...so let us come at last to the text. Look at it with me...1 Corinthians 15...page 961 in our pew Bibles.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:1**...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.

Now you ought to notice that this section is different than the other sections that have come before. It is different in the fact that it doesn't have that phrase, "Now concerning" in front of it. You will remember that that phrase "now concerning" was an easy clue from the text that Paul was addressing one of their points from a

letter they had written him asking him question. There is none of that here. Nor does he say anything like, "It has been reported among you that..." which is an indication that what he was about to discuss something stemming from some report he had received from someone about the goings on in Corinth. There is none of that either.

Still, that must have been the case...that is, that they either written something in a letter that got his attention or someone must have reported something that surprised him because in this section Paul feels the need to discuss both the content of the gospel and the importance of the resurrection. Now I want you to think about that. He is telling the Corinthians here again what the content of the gospel is and he is arguing for both the reality and the importance of the resurrection. Now that raises the question as to why Paul would feel a need to do that and the reason must have been that he felt the gospel was either being misunderstood or perhaps perverted and that the reality of the resurrection was being either misunderstood or denied.

Listen to what Calvin writes here.

...it is truly a dreadful case, and next to a *miracle*, that *anyone* having been instructed by so distinguished a master, should be capable of falling so quickly into such gross error. But it *shouldn't really be all that surprising, it had happened before in Israel when the Sadducees had the audacity to deny openly that man wasn't really any different than brute animals, in so far as his soul was concerned.* Let us note then, that *this kind of blindness is really a judgment from God, so that those who do not rest satisfied with the truth of God, are tossed hither and thither by the delusions of Satan.*³

You see what seems apparent is that somehow the gospel had been perverted in Corinth...that is, that somehow the reality of the gospel and even the content of the gospel had been messed with. So what Paul does here at the end of his letter to the Corinthians is to go back and remind them regarding the truth and nature of what he had actually preached to them. That leads, of course, to the question as to why he waited so long to bring up such an important topic. Calvin addresses that too.

It is asked, however, why *Paul* left off to the close of the Epistle, *something that should have properly had* precedence of everything else? Some reply that this was done for the purpose of impressing it more deeply upon the memory. I am of opinion that Paul *waited* to introduce a subject of such importance, until he had reasserted his authority which had been considerably lessened among the Corinthians. This he accomplished by *addressing* their pride.⁴

I love that. What Calvin is saying is that Paul had to soften them up with some tough talk in order to get them to listen long enough to properly address the gospel. That is different than what Pastor Kyle will be addressing a little later in our study on Galatians. In Galatians Paul dives into them right at the start but here at Corinth...he had to address the way they had denigrated his apostleship and his authority and it was only after he had done that that he began to rip into them over the gospel. Now I want you to notice what he says.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:1**...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.

I want you to notice the two couplets.

In verse one he says...

I preached the gospel to you...

and you received it

and you stand in it

...which seems very positive.

In the second couplet (vs. 2), however, he poses what seems to be a problem...

I preached to you the word

by which you are being saved, if you hold fast...

unless you believed in vain.

Now the idea is pretty simple. Paul is reminding the Corinthians concerning the gospel that he had preached to them. He is reminding them of the gospel he had preached and they had received...which means that he is reminding them of the gospel he had preached and which they claimed they had believed and which to be standing in even now...to stand in something means to be living in light of its truth.

But then Paul goes on to add that he preached a word to them...which generally means "doctrine" and that they are being saved by that same word if they hold fast to it...which hints that they might not be holding fast to it. He then adds another phrase to that that poses the possibility that they may have believed in vain...which is another way of saying that they may not have really believed the gospel at all.

Now why would Paul raise the question of doubt? Why would he pose the possibility that their faith might perhaps be in vain? What was it that happened that caused him to wonder whether or not they were genuinely converted?

What we are going to see in a few minutes is that at least some of the Corinthians had given up the idea of the reality of the resurrection.⁵

You will be able to see that in a minute or two. Now what Paul does next in verses 3-4 is to remind the Corinthians of the content of gospel. Then, in verses 5-11, he reminds them of the importance of the fact that Christ was really and truly resurrected from the dead and that he appeared to the apostles and that those apostles, of which he was the last. Finally, he reminds the Corinthians that all of the apostles...from first to last agreed on the content of what was preached and believed.

Now let's look at verses three through five...the content of the gospel.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:3**...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,

Now the first thing Paul covers is the fact that what he delivered to the Corinthians in terms of a message was something he had received. You see that phrase "for I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received" is almost exactly the same as the passage in 1 Corinthians 11 where he talks about what he had received concerning the Lord's Supper.

There he writes...

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 11:23**...For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...

Here he writes...

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:3**...For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received...

You can see there the similarity between the two passages and the idea is that Paul is relating the historic Christian gospel tradition that he had received.⁶ He had received the facts regarding the Lord's Supper and he had received the facts of the gospel as well. Now that truth was part of the historic church tradition was there well before Paul came on the scene but it wasn't just tradition it was something firmly founded in the Bible. The main point is that the gospel wasn't something Paul made up or created. I say that because a few years ago on PBS they had a ridiculous documentary in which they pitched the idea that Paul had created the Christian faith himself. They argued that Paul heard about Jesus' death and that he took that basic fact and added to it and expanded it and turned it into what we know today. In the series the scholars, and I hesitate to call them that, argued that Paul was the creator of Christianity...not Jesus.

Paul, of course, denies that. He denies that right here when he argues that he received the facts, the information from those who had gone before him. And he makes the point that he delivered to the Corinthians exactly what he received. The idea is that he hadn't changed anything or messed with anything and his implication is that they had.

Now the next thing I want you to see is his description of the content of the gospel.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:3**...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,

Now what Paul does is to remind the Corinthians of the facts of the Christian faith. Those facts are that Christ died was buried and was raised the third day. Those are the historical facts pure and simple. But to understand those facts we must go to the Scripture for the Scripture alone assigns meaning to those facts.⁷ Now let me explain what I mean. The message that is contained here is that Christ died and rose. Now the same message is included in other passages like 1 Thessalonians 4:14 even though says what it says a bit differently.

^{ESV} **1 Thessalonians 4:14**...For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again...

You see in Thessalonians the name Jesus is used but here the name Christ is used and the importance of that is that Paul is interpreting the death of Jesus in light of what the Scripture teaches and that is that Jesus is God's appointed messenger and agent to bring about sinful mankind's redemption. So, of course, Paul refers to Him as the Christ...not simply as Jesus. Jesus was His human name...Christ was His divine title.

When Paul says that He died according to the Scriptures and was buried...he means that His death was appointed by God as a sacrifice for sinners and was not the result of some tragic misadventure.

And what he says is that the gospel that he proclaimed was of first importance. That is another way of saying that it was the most crucial thing that Paul preached

and you know that makes perfect sense going all the way back to the beginning of the letter when Paul told the Corinthians...

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 2:1**...And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

You see Paul's point was that the message of the gospel was the central tenet of the faith...that it was the main thing...the chief article of the faith and the implication that Paul found it necessary to remind the Corinthians again about the nature and content of the gospel is a pretty good sign that he wasn't all that sure that they really understood it.

So, if I were to ask you what the gospel was this morning, how would you respond? A few years ago my friend Mike Horton and his friends at the White Horse Inn, a radio program, went to Christian Bookseller's Convention and walked around on the floor of the convention asking people what they thought the gospel was. The way they posed their question was, "Can you tell me how you would define the gospel?" You cannot believe how some people answered that question. They said things like, "Well we are all here together celebrating" or "That we don't ever have to sick or poor again." A few answered, "Well the gospel means that I can be a better husband or wife." One person said, "I don't really think too much about what it means, I just believe it." Out of about a hundred people asked only one or two people got the answer right. Now the sad thing about that is that that was the industry churning out the stuff people read as Christian truth. So let me ask you again, "If you had to answer the question, 'What is the gospel?' how would you answer the question?"

The answer is...“The gospel is the good news that Christ died according to the Scriptures and was buried and rose again according the Scriptures.”

Now the implications of the gospel are something else altogether. The implications of the gospel cover all of those things that are true because of Christ’s death and resurrection but we ought not to get the message confused. The good news is that Christ died according to the Scriptures and was buried and he rose again according to the Scriptures.

Now the thing I want you to notice next is just how important Paul thnks the resurrection was. Notice As I read verses 5-11, just how many times Paul mentions the fact that Christ appeared after the resurrection.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:5**...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.

Now we have to stop right there because of time but I want you to notice the next paragraph were Paul is going to argue that about the importance of the resurrection. He is going to hammer it all over again and his basic premise is that if there is no resurrection not even Christ was raised from the dead and we are all still in our sins, Look at how he says that in verse 12.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:12**...Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

No we'll come back to this section next week but I want you to see why Paul has focused so much on the reality of the resurrection. It is because were some in Corinth that apparently had given up on the idea of the resurrection altogether and for Paul the importance of the resurrection was not something that could ever be compromised. My guess is that Paul himself had stood at the edge of a few graves himself and looked over into that hole and found himself running headlong to the comfort of the gospel.

Let's pray.

¹ <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/10/11/60minutes/main3358652.shtml>

This segment was originally broadcast on Oct. 14, 2007. It was updated on June 5, 2008.

² Christopher Marlow, *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, the 1604 Quarto at Project Gutenberg.

<http://www.archive.org/stream/drfst10a/drfst10a.txt>

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 15:1.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 15:1.

⁵ David E. Garland, *1st Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 683. Garland writes: "If they do not hold firmly to what has been preached about the resurrection, they jeopardize their future with God. If they do not have faith that holds out, they believed in vain (cf. 15:58; 16:13). If they have faith in something that is untrue, they believed in vain (15:14). The resurrection is the keystone that integrates the incarnation and Christ's atoning death. If it is removed, the whole gospel will collapse. If there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12), humans remain under the

tyranny of sin and death, and their bouts of doubt and despair are fully justified.”

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), pp. 721-2. Fee writes, “Of crucial importance here is the clear implication that the two basic tenets of the Christian faith, atonement through death of Christ and a high Christology based on his resurrection were well formed before Paul came on the scene. For all the shaping that Christian theology underwent in his hands, the basic elements were there before and after him.” Amen.

⁷ Garland, 684. Garland explains that Galatians 1:11-14 is not a contradiction. Paul knew the facts that had been taught and thus received. He heard them (received them) from others but came to understand the right interpretation of those facts only through revelation.