

From The Pulpit Of



Of First Importance

No. 34

1 Corinthians 15:1-7

Series: 1 Corinthians

February 22, 2026

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Text

[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.

[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, [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.

Intro:

- Arouse Interest
 - The late Kobe Bryant is often proclaimed to have been one of the greatest basketball players of all time, if not the greatest. But what may not be known about the man was that, according to those who watched him practice, Kobe was meticulous in drilling the fundamentals of the game. On one of the days when Kobe was practicing by himself, a passerby was watching him play. He came up to him and asked, “Kobe, you’re the best player in the world. Why would you spend 45 minutes of your workout doing such basic footwork?”
 - Kobe smiled and raised an eyebrow:
 - “Why do you think I’m the best player in the world?”¹

- Surface Need:
 - This is one of the most important lessons we can learn in life. If you ever truly want to be great at something, whether it’s music, sports, or school,

¹ Alan Wozniak, “Business Lessons from Kobe Bryant | The Power of Basics,” *Executive Coaching*, 15 May 2025, <https://businesshealthmatters.org/business-lessons-kobe-bryant/>.

you need to have a good mastery of the basics. You need time to practice the principles.

- Brothers and sisters, the Christian faith is no different. Christianity often requires us to remember the basics. To remind ourselves of the first principles of our faith.
- Although there are depths we can grow in our knowledge of God, depths of spirituality we can continue to make progress in, ultimately, the deep things of the Christian faith will prove to be unhelpful for us, if in the process, we forget the fundamentals of our faith. If we fail to remember the things that the Apostle Paul calls of first importance.
- Orient to Text:
 - Throughout this letter, Paul has been dealing with a variety of issues that were coming up within the communal life of the Corinthian church.
 - There were issues of wealth and poverty.
 - There have been some who have been too legalistic and some who have been too lax.
 - Some members are proudly flaunting their spiritual gifts while others are deep in sexual immorality.
 - There's been a lot happening in this letter.
 - And it's striking that as Paul is wrapping up the end of this letter, he still takes a good amount of space to remind his church of the fundamentals of the Christian faith.
 - As we'll see in our study of 1 Corinthians 15, the fundamental gospel truth that Paul wants the Corinthian church to hold fast to is just this: ***The Christ who died for our sins now lives to free us from sin!***
- Organizational Sentence:
 - Our study this morning is going to be organized into two parts: The Character of our Gospel (1-2) and The Content of our Gospel (3-7).
 - Now, just to let you all know, we are intentionally slowing down in our study of 1 Corinthians 15. The aim of the next few weeks is to meditate on Christ's resurrection all the way up through Easter. That may seem long, but I hope to show in this intro sermon into 1 Corinthians 15 that there is actually a lot to think about when we are contemplating Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection.

The Character Of Our Gospel (1-2)

- So let's get into this. Look with me here, starting at verse 1:

- [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 notice in just these two verses, there are a lot of things the apostle Paul tells us about the character of this gospel.
- First, this is a gospel which must be preached. This is a gospel which must be proclaimed.
 - We often talk about this in our Joining the Mission Class, but the common Christian phrase “preach the gospel, and if necessary use words” is well-intentioned but rather misinformed. The word gospel just is the Greek word for good news. In the Greco-Roman context, the gospel of the emperor Augustus was that he was victorious in war and brought peace to the empire.²
 - In a similar manner, when Paul is talking about the gospel of Jesus Christ, he’s not simply talking about a lifestyle. He’s not talking about the values that Christ commends. No, when Paul proclaims the gospel, he is saying that Jesus Christ our Lord did something to save his people from destruction.

Application

- Brothers and sisters, make no mistake. Being a good and godly person amongst your family, friends, and community is important. It is a necessary condition to be a faithful witness, but it is not sufficient to save anybody. It is not enough for the world around us to know that Christians are good people.
- They need to know why we follow Christ. They need to hear for themselves what Jesus Christ has accomplished for our salvation. They need to have the chance to personally respond to the good news of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. They need to be confronted with the choice, not whether or not Jesus Christ is the Lord, but whether or not Jesus Christ is going to be my Lord.
- And they won’t get that chance unless you say something to them! Unless you and I like Paul preach the good news of Jesus Christ to those who need to hear it. Paul himself backs this up when he says in Romans 10:14:
 - How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

² Joel B. Green, ed., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, 2. ed., The IVP Bible Dictionary Series (IVP, 2013).

- The answer to all these questions is that they won't. If we don't preach, they won't hear. If they don't hear, they won't believe. And if they don't believe, they will not be saved.

Explanation

- This leads us to the second characteristic of this gospel. Not only must the gospel be proclaimed, but it must also be received. It must be personally appropriated for yourself.

Application

- Immediately, this has all kinds of controversial implications. If Paul is right, universalism is wrong. The idea that all people will be saved and reconciled to God, irrespective of their individual religious beliefs, is wrong.
- According to Paul, if you do not receive the good news of Christ for yourself, you will not be saved. If Jesus Christ is not your king, you will have no place in his kingdom.

Explanation

- According to Paul, it's not even enough to simply believe the gospel at one time in your life. It's not enough simply to pray a prayer and think you're just good with God for the rest of your life.
- Look at the verbs that Paul is using.
 - Which you received.
 - In which you stand. That word stand is in the perfect tense in Greek. It means I stood here one time in the past, and I'm still standing here today. Not only did I believe this back then. I still believe it today.
 - "by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain."

Application

- Beloved, it is not enough to simply trust in Christ at one time in your life. Do you trust in Christ today? It is not enough to simply claim Christ as Lord in the past. Is he the Lord of your present?
- This is why Paul, even in the midst of a mixed up church, still takes the time to drill the fundamentals with them again. To remind them of the gospel truths of first importance.
- There's a lot of talk about what it means to have a Christian culture nowadays. And there definitely are some benefits to living within a culture where the Christian faith is respected. But friend, if you're here today, and you're checking out this whole Christianity thing for yourself, you should just know that there are

- a lot of people who fit in well within a Christian culture, who act good and moral, who may even be respected within Christian circles, who are going to hell because they are not standing on the good news of Christ today. Because they are not holding fast to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior now.
- Friends, we must get the character of the gospel right. The gospel is not a new lifestyle. It is not a set of moral principles. It is not simply an entrance into a new social club. No, the gospel is good news. It is good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ to save his people from their sins. And it is the kind of good news that God calls all people to bank our lives on.

Content of the Gospel (3-7)

- What has God done to save his people? What did Jesus do to save us from destruction? This is the question that Paul answers for us in verses 3-7. Here, Paul moves from the characteristics of the gospel to the content of the gospel. To the things that Paul himself calls of first importance for the believer to remember. Look with me here starting at verse 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, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.
- Notice, not even Paul himself is exempt from the requirements to be saved, as he laid out in verses 1 and 2. According to Paul in verse 3, he himself needed to receive the truth of the gospel to be saved. There are no exceptions here.
- But what exactly does Paul say here that sinners need to receive in order to be saved?
- Well, the first thing that Paul states here in verse 3 is that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. What does it mean for Christ to die for our sins? The Greek preposition behind “for our sins” here is (ὕπὲρ). There are a lot of nuances to this preposition, but when paired with a genitive noun as it is here, it implies the notion of substitutionary representation.³
 - Paul himself uses the same preposition in Romans 9:3 when he writes:
 - For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.
 - Or in Philemon 1:13:

³ Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Zondervan Pub. House, 2000). 172.

- I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel.
- In other words, what Paul is saying here is that Christ died on our behalf. In the place of us. As a substitutionary representative in our stead. While you and I sinned against God, broke his law, deserve the just condemnation of a holy and righteous king, Jesus Christ the sinless Son of God, interposed himself, and took the punishment for our sins on our behalf.
- Friends, the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ is not simply an aspect of what Jesus Christ did for us at the cross. According to Paul, it is a fundamental of the gospel. It is of first importance.
 - Jesus took the penalty I deserved, so that I could be pardoned for my sins.
 - Jesus took the condemnation I deserved, so that I could be set free.
 - Jesus died in my stead so that I can now live and live in right relationship to God.
- Many scholars believe that what Paul is referencing here when he says that Christ died according to the Scriptures is potentially a reference to Isaiah 53, where the Messiah who was prophesied to save his people is said to save his people by dying in their stead. Isaiah 53:5
 - 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.
- Friends, the beauty of the Christian faith is that we serve a God who doesn't simply demand sacrifices from us. He himself pays the sacrifice we need to save us from our sins. He himself dies, so that sinners like us might live. And friends, that is a God who is worthy of all our trust. A God who is worthy of all our adoration and praise.
- But notice here, according to Paul, it is not enough simply to believe that Jesus died. According to verse 4, it is also of first importance that Jesus rose from the dead, and that his resurrection can be verified by eyewitness accounts.
- And Paul is adamant about this. It is vital to the Christian faith that Jesus actually rose from the dead. According to Paul in verse 17, if Jesus did not rise again from the dead, then we are still in our sins. Paul pushes this point in Romans 4:25 where Jesus is said to be, "delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."
- According to Paul, the resurrection served as God's means of declaring that the sacrifice of Christ is accepted. That the blood of Christ is enough to cleanse us

from all our sins. That the demands of justice have been fulfilled in his death. And that now, Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth to pardon all those who turn from their sins and trust in him for salvation.

- All of this depends upon the fact that Jesus Christ really did rise again from the dead. This is of fundamental importance to Paul.
- And as we are reading this, we need to remember that Paul is talking to the Corinthian church whose members are being tempted to doubt the resurrection of Christ. We've seen some signs of false teachers in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 who were saying that the body doesn't matter and what really matters is our spiritual state of being. It's very likely that these are the same people who are criticizing the resurrection of the dead here in verse 13. We don't know for sure their arguments, but I can imagine that many of them were being tempted to believe the same kinds of things academics teach about the resurrection of Jesus today.
 - That maybe this is just some kind of spiritual resurrection, not actually a bodily resurrection.
 - That maybe this is some kind of religious metaphor about how we all need to die to our old selves to really live our best life now.
- I don't know for sure what they were saying back then. All I know is that Paul puts all of his chips in on the truth of the resurrection. He lays it all down here on this point.
 - According to Paul, if the resurrection didn't happen, Christianity is a lie.
 - According to Paul, if the resurrection didn't happen, Jesus is either a fool or a liar.
 - According to Paul, if the resurrection didn't happen, you and I have much better things to do with our lives than come to church and study this old book here.
- Brothers and sisters, all of Christianity hangs on whether or not Jesus really did rise from the dead or not.
- And as Paul is setting the stakes of the matter this high, Paul also starts to show the evidence for the resurrection here in verse 5. Paul starts to list off the names of people who actually saw Jesus again after he rose from the dead.
 - Jesus appeared to Cephas or Peter
 - He appeared to the 12 disciples
 - He appeared to 500 brothers at one time, some of whom were still alive at the time.
 - Finally, Jesus appeared to all the apostles.

- Why is Paul listing all of these names? Why does Paul mention that some of these brothers are still alive?
- It's very clear what Paul is doing here. He's telling anyone in Corinth, anyone who had any doubts about the resurrection, "You can just ask these people for yourself. You can research this for yourself. You can shake the pillar of our faith as hard as you can, and I guarantee to you, it will not fall."
- Friends, the confidence that Paul has in the resurrection is astounding. And even though there are a couple of thousand years between Paul and us, I would argue that believers ought to have that same kind of confidence in the resurrection of Christ today.
- Bart Ehrman, who is no friend of evangelical Christianity, still agrees that these four facts are historically indisputable.
 - Jesus really did die on the cross. He really was buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb.
 - His tomb really was empty.
 - His followers really claimed to see him raised from the dead.
 - And their witness to his resurrection really was the start of the Christian movement.⁴

- What is the best explanation for these facts? Well, maybe Jesus didn't die, he just passed out and woke up in a tomb? Friends, there's a reason why Paul says in verse 4 that Jesus was buried. It's to demonstrate the fact that Jesus really was dead. Even during Roman times, people could still tell if the body they were burning was dead or not.
- Well, maybe his disciples lied about the whole thing? Well, according to Paul in verse 6, not only would the disciples need to lie, they would need to convince 500 other people to lie with them. By the way, all the disciples of Jesus died terribly for their faith. Think about Peter. The guy who chickened out and denied ever knowing Jesus. Do you really think that guy is going to be crucified for something he knew was a lie?
- Well, maybe they were just crazy and hallucinating. Again, that would mean 500 people would need to have the same hallucination at the same time. Not only that, but Paul is asking the church in Corinth to go and ask these 500 people about the time they saw the resurrected Jesus. Do you really think skeptics who are already doubting their faith are going to be convinced by crazy hallucinating lunatics that Jesus rose from the dead? Keep in mind, there is no benefit for being a Christian at this time. You lose your family. You lose your community. You often lose your freedom because of persecution. And you sometimes lose your life because of

⁴ Bart Ehrman, "From Jesus to Constantine: A History of Early Christianity," Lecture 4: "Oral and Written Traditions about Jesus" (The Teaching Company, 2003).

- your faith. You really think these people would do this on the testimony of lunatics?
- Now, I know I'm not the smartest person in this room. And I'm sure many of you can think of several objections that I haven't even touched on yet this morning.
 - But friend, if you're here today and you are doubting the veracity of the resurrection, or if you're not sure what to make of all this, I would challenge you this morning to look into the resurrection of Jesus. Go ahead. Do your research. Test this thing. Shake this foundation as hard as you can. See if it holds up.
 - Go ahead and look at N.T. Wright's critically renowned work *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and contend with his argument that the Greek word for resurrection (ἀνάστασις) virtually always means bodily resurrection. It cannot possibly be a reference to a merely spiritual resurrection.⁵
 - Go ahead and read Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and The Eyewitnesses* which argues that the way the gospel accounts list various random names such as Simon of Cyrene are done so that the original readers could go and ask Simon himself to verify these accounts.⁶
 - Go ahead and look at Richard Swinburn's use of Bayes' Theorem to defend the historical probability of the resurrection.⁷
 - Go ahead and read Gary Habermas's massive, encyclopedic four-volume defense of the resurrection of Christ.⁸
 - Go for it. I double-dare you to do it.
 - But just know this, if it's true, if Jesus really did come back from the dead, like Paul says he did, then this isn't just another oddity of history. If it's true, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has massive implications for every aspect of your life.

Application

- We are going to get into more of these as we continue our study of 1 Corinthians 15, but for today, I want to summarize four massive implications of Christ's resurrection. Implications we will go into more depth in later.
- First, if Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead, then sin doesn't have to define you. Jesus Christ lived the life we could not live, he died to pay the penalty we

⁵ N. T. Wright, "Christian Origins and the Question of God. Vol. 3: The Resurrection of the Son of God," Nachdr. (Fortress Press, 2008). 209.

⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, 2nd Ed: The Gospels As Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017).

⁷ Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Clarendon Press, 2003).

⁸ Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection, Volume 1: Evidences*, 1st ed., 4 vols., *On the Resurrection Series v. 1* (B&H Publishing Group, 2024).

could not pay, and he rose again from the dead to assure us that his blood is enough to cleanse us from all of our sins and make us right with God.

- The apostle Paul states in 1 Cor. 15:8 that he was the most undeserving sinner of them all. But because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, even a murderer like Paul can receive forgiveness and grace.
- Not only do your sins not have the final say on your life, but the sins of others against you don't define you either. Some of you have been abused. Some of you have been oppressed. Some of you have gone through horrible things in life. And the world has a way of always telling you that you will always be a victim, that you will never escape the cruel circumstances of your life.
- But friend, if God could take the worst tragedy the world has ever seen, the death of the innocent Son of God, and use it to bring about a miraculous salvation that no one could imagine, think of what God could do with your life as well. If the resurrection is true, then sin doesn't get the last say on your life.
- Second, if the resurrection is true, then death is not the end. So many people today have resigned themselves to the reality of death. They accept death as simply a cruel inevitability of life. But according to Paul, if Jesus rose from the dead, then death is not the end. Death one day will die. And we who trust in Christ can now grieve death as the vile tragedy that it is. We can call it evil. We can call it wicked. We can reject death as the abomination that it is. And at the same time, we can still hold to hope, even as we grieve in the face of death. For one day, we will live in a world where death will be no more.
- This naturally leads us to our third application. If the resurrection is true, if Jesus Christ really rose from the grave and dealt a decisive death blow against the enemy of death itself, then it must be true that Jesus Christ is Lord. It doesn't matter how much money Trump pumps into our military, how many nukes Ali Khamenei has stashed out of sight, how strong Xi Jinping's economy gets, or how much territory Putin can annex to Russia. None of these leaders have conquered death itself. But if Christ has overcome the ultimate enemy, then he truly is the King of kings and Lord of lords. And if Jesus Christ is truly my King and my Lord, then no weapon formed against me can ever truly end me.
- Finally, if the resurrection is true, if Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead, then that means everything we do in this life matters.
 - It matters that we struggle in this life for sexual purity. As Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 6:13, if our bodies are not intended for sexual immorality but rather to be raised to see and know God, then it matters that we use our bodies now for what we will be using our bodies for then.
 - It matters that we strive for the unity of our church. If one day, you and I will be together forever in the resurrected community of Christ, then it matters that I learn to love you today as I will love you forever then.

- Beloved, no matter how little our progress in sanctification may be, no matter how difficult the fight may be, if Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead, then it matters that you and I continue to fight against our sin today. Why? Because the Christ who died for our sins now lives forevermore to free us from our sins.
- And because Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead, you and I now know that our struggle against our sins in this life will only end in victory for those who trust and follow a risen Lord today.
- This is the hope of the Christian life. This is the hope that is grounded in the fact that Jesus Christ really did rise again from the dead. And because Jesus rose, you and I who trust in Christ today now know that it's just a matter of time before we too will rise to be with our Lord and Savior for the rest of all eternity!