



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 15:1-11

Topic

With a masterful economy of words the apostle Paul defines the Gospel of the grace of God

Title

"It's a Grace that Only Our Father Could Give"

Introduction

The Gettysburg Address has come to be regarded as one of the greatest speeches in American history, if not all of history. It was delivered by Abraham Lincoln at the dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on the afternoon of Thursday, November 19, 1863, during the Civil War, four and a half months after the Union armies defeated those of the Confederacy at the decisive Battle of Gettysburg.

The president wasn't the featured speaker at the dedication. Edward Everett, former representative, senator, and governor of Massachusetts, delivered the keynote address.

Everett's talk lasted a full two-hours. Lincoln's more famous address consists of only ten sentences and lasted about two minutes.

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Lincoln could say a lot in just a few words. *But he is outdone by the apostle Paul.* Using just twenty-seven English words the apostle totally and completely defines the Gospel - the good news of God's salvation offered to mankind. You find the words in verses three and four of First Corinthians fifteen.

Think of it: The power to save a man's soul for eternity can be proclaimed to him in about ten seconds!

It is my prayer we will marvel at the Gospel today as we work through this concise text. I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 You Have A Proclamation Of Grace To Communicate For God, and #2 God Has A Transformation By Grace To Consummate In You.

#1 You Have A Proclamation Of Grace To Communicate For God

(v1-4)

It's always a good idea to try to understand why something was written in the first place. It keeps us from misreading the text, or from reading into it our own biases.

The saints at Corinth had received and believed the Gospel. They were saved. But some of them had an incorrect view of the future resurrection of believers from the dead. Look at verse twelve for a moment:

1 Corinthians 15:12 Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

Paul had preached, and they preached, that "Christ... has been raised from the dead." But they went on to teach falsely that "there is no resurrection of the dead" for believers.

Paul wrote these verses to show them the logical inconsistency and the spiritual absurdity of their position.

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Knowing these facts will help us get through a very difficult couple of verses right at the beginning!

1 Corinthians 15:1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,

Paul had arrived in Corinth alone. By God's providence he got hooked-up with Aquila and Priscilla and worked for them in their tent-making business. He worked during the week and preached in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Though his preaching and teaching lasted longer, the ten second Gospel message was enough to save the soul of the chief ruler of the synagogue and then many others in Corinth.

For the next eighteen months Paul continued his ministry there. He "preached," many "received" the Lord and were "stand[ing]" on the solid rock of the Gospel.

The next verse sounds troubling at first:

1 Corinthians 15:2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you - unless you believed in vain.

Does Paul mean to say that salvation is a matter of my ability to "hold fast that word?" Some would say, "Yes," but I don't think that is what he meant here. He was not addressing the perseverance of the saints but, rather, the logical conclusion of their incorrect teaching about the future resurrection of believers.

They definitely believed Jesus rose from the dead. What they no longer believed was that Christians would rise from the dead.

It was commonly taught by the Greek intellectuals that a person's soul, the immaterial part of him, was immortal, but that the body, the material part of him, was not. The Greek culture rejected any thought of a physical resurrection of the body. When Paul had preached on Mars Hill in Athens he was ridiculed when he started talking about a physical resurrection from the dead.

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The believers in Corinth had begun to adopt the Greek teaching that there was no future physical resurrection of the body. In verses twelve through nineteen Paul will argue that if the dead are not raised then neither was Jesus raised. Then, in verses twenty through twenty-eight he will argue that since Jesus has been raised, so will we.

Here, then, is what I think Paul was saying in verse two to the saints in Corinth. If you do not “hold fast that word which I preached to you” - that is, if now believe that there is no future physical resurrection from the dead - then it logically follows that Jesus did not rise from the dead and therefore believing in Him is in vain.

If their teaching was correct, it reduced the Gospel to a lie that cannot save anyone. It was logically inconsistent and spiritually absurd.

Speaking of the Gospel, what is it? How would you define it? Here it comes, in some of the most beautifully concise language you will ever encounter.

1 Corinthians 15:3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

“First of all” means first in priority. Whatever else Paul taught from the Scriptures week-by-week and day-by-day, it was all subordinate to his understanding of the Gospel that saves men’s souls. Then he gives you the Gospel.

“Christ died for our sins.” “Christ” connects the historical person, Jesus, with all the many prophecies and promises in the Old Testament that God would send Israel a Messiah and the world a Savior.

The fact “Christ died for our sins” presupposes an alienation between God and man whose penalty was death. It lets us know that the problem with the world is sin and that sin is separation from God.

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“For our sins” tells you that Jesus Christ died as a Substitute, taking your place, to satisfy the penalty for sins.

“According to the Scriptures” reminds you that everything God has said in His Word was leading up to the death of Jesus Christ to save you from your sins. Beginning in Genesis and continuing all through the Old Testament you have the story of the Messiah and Savior being sent into the world while, in the mean time, lambs were offered as a temporary substitute for your sins. Then, one glorious moment in human history, Jesus stepped forward, the prophesied and promised Christ, and was declared by John the Baptist “the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world.”

“He was buried” verifies that Jesus Christ was a real man in a physical body. He died on the Cross and was “buried” as a dead corpse in the tomb.

“He rose again” in a real, physical body - a glorified body fit for eternity. “Rose” is in a verb tense that means He has been raised and still lives forever.

“The third day” establishes that we are talking about the historic events that occurred in Jerusalem in the first century.

Again Paul said it was “according to the Scriptures.” The phrase modifies the fact that Jesus Christ was “raised.” It reminds us of the passages in the Old Testament, like Psalm twenty-two and Psalm sixteen and Psalm one hundred and ten, where the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah and Savior were prophesied and promised.

That’s it in the proverbial nutshell! “ [Jesus] Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and... He was buried, and... He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” You can say more - a lot more - but it’s all prefigured in this masterful definition of the Gospel.

Paul said he “delivered” what he had “received.” That word “received” is another big word that summarizes so much! It tells us that the Gospel comes to us as a gift, by God’s grace. It cannot be discerned by human

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reason. It cannot be earned by human works. It is God's free gift. It is to be "received" by faith as you simply believe.

Then it is "delivered." It reminds me of a telegram being "delivered." Telegrams are short, concise messages that say something incredibly important. The person who delivers it adds nothing to it; they only deliver it faithfully.

Paul received it and delivered it. We receive it and then are to deliver it.

Part of our hesitation is we think we must be like Edward Everett when Abraham Lincoln will do!

We have a tendency to want to explain the Gospel. For sure, we love the branch of theology called Apologetics. It comes from the Greek word *apologia*, a legal term meaning "defense." It is the branch of Christian theology concerned with the intelligent presentation and defense of the historical Christian faith.

The Gospel itself is something to proclaim, not explain. It's wonderfully explainable. But we are to deliver it so it can be received.

Start with the basics. Let the power reside in the Word of God and not your explanations. Say more if there is an open door or an ongoing dialog. Deliver what you received!

#2 God Has A Transformation By Grace To Consummate In You

(v5-11)

The next few verses are not meant to be proof for the Gospel so much as they show the transformation the Gospel accomplishes.

1 Corinthians 15:5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.

1 Corinthians 15:6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.

1 Corinthians 15:7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.

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We know “Cephas” better as the apostle Peter. If ever a man was transformed by the Gospel, it was Peter. See him trembling at the fire, afraid of the testimony of a servant girl. Then see him bold to proclaim the Gospel to a hostile crowd of many thousands on the Day of Pentecost! See him flee from His Savior’s crucifixion only to ask, according to church history, to be himself crucified upside down because he was not worthy to die in the same manner as His Lord and Master.

“The twelve” was the designation given by the early church to the original eleven disciples of Jesus and Matthias, who was chosen to replace Judas. These misfits went on to turn the world upside down proclaiming the Gospel.

We don’t know when or where “five hundred brethren” saw the risen Jesus Christ “at once.” But again we would emphasize the radical transformation of the Gospel. It’s a reminder that not only is the Lord saving men one-by-one, He is putting them into His family, into His body. There is an incredible, supernatural union that takes place between those who receive the Gospel and believe.

Notice Paul’s passing mention that some of them had “fallen asleep.” Maybe he was anticipating an argument from those who denied the resurrection that believers were dying with no sign of being raised. They had died but it was more like being “asleep” because their spirits would be reunited with their bodies at the resurrection of the dead.

Jesus “was seen by James.” This “James” was the half-brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary. What is remarkable is that James and the others siblings of Jesus, who grew up with Him, did not believe in Him until after the resurrection! But then - what a transformation! He rose to a position of leadership in the Jerusalem church and wrote a letter that challenges believers to this day to walk in a manner worthy of Jesus.

“By all the apostles” tells us that there were others who were considered “apostles” in the first century. Those guys went around establishing churches with signs and wonders following. Wow! Power, transforming power, was on display in their ministries.

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1 Corinthians 15:8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Paul built-up to his own testimony of the transforming power of the grace of God through the Gospel. The number one persecutor of Christians, Paul was transformed on the road to Damascus by an encounter with the risen Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

“Grace,” “grace,” “grace.” It was all the gift of God. Yet grace inspired a response from Paul - he “labored more abundantly than” all the rest.

Clearly he was not boasting. Remember there was a problem in Corinth in that some of the believers thought very little of Paul as an apostle. Notice what he said next:

1 Corinthians 15:11 Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

The messenger is insignificant, in one sense. Peter, James, the twelve, the other apostles, the five hundred - all had received the same Gospel and all delivered it to others.

The Gospel is the power to transform a life from within. Look at Paul again:

1. “Christ died for our sins.” On the road to Damascus, Paul understood he was a sinner, alienated from God and deserving the penalty of death.
2. Jesus Christ “was buried and He rose again the third day.” The resurrected Jesus provided the power to transform Paul from within. He became a new creation in Jesus Christ.
3. Paul would go on to teach the God, Who had begun this transformation, would continue it on earth and complete it once Paul was taken to Heaven - either through resurrection or the rapture.

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There is a result to the Gospel of grace. It is to “labor more abundantly.” It can sound like a contradiction. If it’s all of grace, how can you talk about how much you’re doing for God?

It was no contradiction for Paul. Grace was so real to him that it propelled him, redirecting all of his natural energies towards serving Jesus.

It can get a little dicey here. We are definitely *not* talking about doing works of righteousness by which we consider ourselves more spiritual than others. We’re not talking about lists of “do’s” and “don’ts” that set us apart from others and make us appear more spiritual.

We *are* talking about the bent, the passion, of our heart. Is it to “labor more abundantly” for Jesus because of what He has done and is continuing to do in me?

Here is another way of looking at it. Does my understanding of grace make me lazy? Am I cruising through life, taking advantage of God’s abundance while giving Him my pittance?

Bottom line: I should always be doing more for God, not less, until He calls me home. I don’t do it out of duty but from devotion.