

*The Gospel of Grace*  
1 Corinthians 15:1-11

In any discipline or occupation or area of study there are some foundational things that must be learned/mastered. Without such fundamentals, you really can't make any progress.

- Like some of you I helped coach my kids' sports teams when they were younger. Manhattan has this wonderful basketball league called Little Dribblers. One of the things we tried to get our "little dribblers" to understand is that you dribble (and pass and shoot) with your fingertips. You don't slap the ball with your palms; you dribble with your fingertips. That's fundamental; if you don't "get" that, you'll never dribble very well.
- In English, one of the fundamental things you need to understand is that "subjects and verbs must agree in number." Both need to be singular or both need to be plural. You wouldn't say, "We is going to the store." You'd say, "We are going to the store." Again, if you don't "get" that subjects and verbs need to agree, you won't get very far.
- We could multiply the examples in all sorts of disciplines, occupations, and areas of study.

When it comes to the Christian faith, the fundamental thing that must be learned/mastered is the message of the gospel. If you don't "get" the gospel, nothing else will make sense. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul says that this message of the gospel "is of first importance." Everything in the Christian life is built on the foundation of the gospel.

The church at Corinth had many problems. One of their doctrinal problems involved confusion about whether or not Christians would be bodily raised from the dead. Paul will argue in 1 Corinthians 15 that the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of the believer rise or fall together; either you have both or you have neither. Before he lurches into a discussion of the resurrection of believers, Paul reestablishes the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a key element in the foundational message of the gospel.

*The Gospel of Grace (15:1-11)*

It's interesting how Paul expresses himself in these verses. He reiterates that what he's writing is something that he'd already taught them and something that they'd already believed. He is drawing them back to something essential to their faith.

15:1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

Paul is reminding them of the basic message of the "gospel" – the good news about Jesus. He'll explain the content of the gospel in verses 3ff. But he reminds them that this is the very gospel that he had preached to them; he's not telling them something new. He reminds them that they had "received" this gospel; they'd believed the gospel when they heard and understood it. He reminds them that this is the gospel "in which [they] also stand." Sometimes the term is translated "stand firm"; it's the idea of stability. The gospel continued to be their stability in the faith and in life. The gospel isn't a message to believe and then forget about. Rather, the gospel is the foundation of the entire Christian life.

Notice how Paul qualifies himself in verse 2. He says that this gospel saves them “if you hold fast the word I preached to you.” Holding onto the gospel doesn’t save a person; it’s the evidence that a person is being saved. We all have our ups and downs (times of disobedience and apathy and carnality) but true believers hold onto the gospel; they don’t move to a place of unbelief (which is very different from doubt). Paul says, “unless you believed *in vain*.” The term “in vain” (a different term than in 15:14 and 15:58) carries the connotation of “rashly” or “thoughtlessly.” Paul is holding out the possibility that some in the church at Corinth hadn’t really understood the content of the gospel before they “believed.” Jesus warned against this same thing in the parable of the four soils (Mark 4). Jesus spoke of the seed falling on rocky soil which springs up but soon withers in the heat. This depicts a person who heard the Word, receives it with joy, but quickly abandons the faith because there was no depth of understanding. There can be a superficial attraction to the gospel without really understanding and then believing it. This possibility makes Paul’s explanation of the gospel in verses 3-8 all the more vital.

Paul stresses that this gospel was “of first importance.” It wasn’t incidental to the faith; it was foundational to the faith.

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

Paul passed along the same gospel that he’d received. There is some evidence that Paul is actually quoting an early creed in verses 3 through 5 that he passed on to the Corinthians. He had explained to them “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” The Old Testament Scriptures depicted a Messiah who would die as a substitute for the people. Paul may have had in mind passages such as Isaiah 53:5-6. Speaking of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, Isaiah wrote:

5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.

There was the expectation that the Christ/Messiah would die for the sins of the people. Paul continues to explain the gospel in verse 4:

4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Mentioning that Jesus was buried confirms that Jesus actually died on the cross. The finality of being buried also anticipates Jesus’ resurrection. “He was raised on the third day” reflects typical Jewish reckoning: Jesus was crucified on Friday (the first day), was in the tomb all of Saturday (the second day), and was resurrected on Sunday (the third day). Paul’s comment “according to the Scriptures” should probably be taken with the truth that Jesus was raised, not that He was raised on the third day. The NT appeals to Scriptures such as Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 110:1-4 as foreshadowing that Jesus would conquer death and would not be left in the grave.

Beginning in verse 5 Paul cites numerous resurrection appearances. Paul wanted to emphasize that the resurrection is an established historical fact; it is not merely a religious idea. Paul had mentioned in verse 4 that Jesus was raised on the third day . . .

5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Cephas is the Aramaic form of the name Peter. Luke 24:34 records that the risen Lord appeared to Peter (Simon). Paul also mentions that Christ appeared to “the twelve” – a way of referring to the original disciples (even though Judas had already died; see Acts 6:2).

6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;

This is our only record of Christ appearing to 500 followers at one time. It may have been in Galilee where Christ told his disciples to meet Him (Matthew 28:10, 16). Paul’s point is clear: there were many people still alive who could verify that Jesus had risen from the dead (1 Corinthians was written 20+ years after the resurrection.).

7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;

Most people understand Paul to be referring to James the brother of Jesus (mentioned in Galatians 1:19, 2:9). Paul mentioned that Christ appeared to “all the apostles”; this is likely a larger group than the original twelve apostles since they were explicitly mentioned in verse 5.

8 and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Paul referred to himself as “one untimely born.” The term Paul uses could refer to a miscarriage or to one born abnormally. The idea is that whereas the risen Christ appeared to everyone mentioned in verses 5 through 7 during the weeks immediately following the resurrection (and before His ascension), Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus *after* He had already ascended to heaven. Paul’s spiritual birth was abnormal in relation to the rest of those to whom Christ appeared. Notice how Paul continues:

9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Peter may have denied the Lord three times; during Jesus’ earthly ministry James may have thought that his half-brother was crazy for the things He taught and did; but Paul aggressively persecuted the church of God. He actively opposed what God was doing in calling out a people for Himself. He stood there in hearty agreement when Stephen was stoned to death. Because he persecuted the church Paul considered himself (present tense) to be “the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle.”

Paul wrote similar things in other letters. In Ephesians 3:8 Paul wrote, “I am [present tense] less than the least of all God’s people” (NIV). In 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul referred to himself (present tense) as “the foremost of sinners.” You might think that 20+ years after becoming a Christian Paul would stop thinking about himself in these terms. After all, he’s paid the price: numerous

times he's been beaten within an inch of his life for the cause of Christ; he's been imprisoned and stoned; he's gone hungry and thirsty; he's about as zealous as a person could be for Christ.

What's going on here? Paul doesn't write, "I used to be unworthy to be an apostle, but now I've proven my worth . . . I used to be the chief of sinners, but now I'm more holy than 98% of all people living . . . I used to be less than the least of all God's people, but now I'm pretty much at the top. . ."

Does Paul have a low self-image? Does he need to quit being so hard on himself? Does Paul have the type of false humility that compels him to insult himself so that others will tell him how spiritual and godly he is?

Or could it be that Paul understood the gospel in a way that gave him the freedom to be honest? Perhaps Paul honestly viewed his past life of opposition to God as so horrific that he actually considered himself to be unworthy to be an apostle. Perhaps feeling/being worthy disqualifies a person from being used by God. Perhaps it's all about the grace of God, which by definition is a gift that can never be earned or deserved.

In verse 10 Paul attributes his apostleship entirely to the grace of God.

10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

Paul never got to a point where he felt like he'd paid God back for all the horrible things he'd done. After 20+ years of serving God as an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul still said, "I am what I am by the grace of God," and not, "I am what I am as a result of hard work and perseverance." Paul attributed his energy as an apostle to the effectiveness of the grace of God: "His grace toward me did not prove vain"; the grace of God was not ineffective; the grace of God did exactly what it was supposed to do. Paul isn't playing semantic games when he says, "but I labored even more than all [of the apostles], yet not I, but the grace of God with me." His ability to sacrifice and labor for the cause of Christ was more evidence of the grace of God.

One way to think about this is to say that Paul never turned into the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. The older brother was the one who stayed home and did the work he was supposed to do while his little brother squandered his estate in a far-off country. The older brother was responsible and hard-working . . . and self-righteous and resentful. Paul worked hard without concluding, "I'm more worthy and better than everybody else."

Do you see the fruit of the gospel of grace in Paul's life? Paul could be honest about his past without a sense of condemnation because the grace of God covered it all. Jesus died for his sin. Paul could be honest about his spiritual progress and ministry without a sense of pride because of the grace of God. He hadn't clawed his way to the top of the spiritual food chain; no, he had only experienced a massive amount of grace. We become children of God by grace (salvation is a free gift) and we continue our life with God by grace (we continue to receive freely from God).

After recounting his own experience, Paul reiterates in verse 11 that the Corinthians had experienced the very same gospel of grace.

11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

All of the apostles preached this consistent message of the gospel of grace. This is the foundational thing we need to know as Christians. If we don't "get" the gospel, nothing else makes sense.

Perhaps you've heard the message of the gospel for the first time here today. Maybe you've gone to church a lot, maybe not. Maybe you've read the Bible or maybe you haven't. What matters is that you understand that Christ died for your sin, was buried, and rose again on the third day. Like the Corinthians who received this letter from Paul, God invites you to "receive" this message. It's a free gift (which is what the word grace means).

Paul's example should make clear that you don't have to clean yourself up before accepting Christ. You don't have to get to the place where you feel pretty certain that you can "pull off" a relationship with God. It's not like that. You mainly need to be convinced that you can never clean yourself up or get your act together. Paul came to Christ as the "foremost of sinners." In a couple minutes I'm going to give you the opportunity to receive Christ – the free gift of grace.

Perhaps you trusted Christ at some time in the past, but you've lost sight of the fact that you not only enter the Christian life by grace but that you continue by grace. Maybe you'd even have to say that you have a tendency to be like the elder brother: you've worked hard and feel like you've earned your keep in the family of God. Maybe you subtly think God owes you more than you've received. Maybe you find yourself continually looking down on others, wondering why they can't be as mature and together as you. The invitation to you is to return to the grace of God. Instead of thinking, "I am what I am through hard work and being responsible," God can open your eyes to see that "you are what you are by the grace of God." Any good that you experience is because of the grace of God.

Perhaps you aren't like the older brother; perhaps you feel like the younger brother who's far from home. Maybe you feel like you've done so many sinful things for so long that you've exhausted the grace of God and now you need to earn your way back into the family. As you know, God doesn't work like that. Either we receive His grace or we don't receive anything. The invitation to you is to return to the grace of God. You entered the family of God through grace and you continue through grace.

Philip Yancey made a striking statement in *What's So Amazing about Grace?*

As a child, I put on my best behavior on Sunday mornings, dressing up for God and for the Christians around me. It never occurred to me that church was a place to be honest. Now though as I seek to look at the world through the lens of grace, I realize that imperfection is the prerequisite for grace. Light only gets in through the cracks. (p. 273)

The gospel of grace produces a community of believers who have the freedom to be honest. We have the freedom to be honest about where we've been and where we are. Since we are what we are by the grace of God, there is nothing to prove and nothing to earn.