

Sermon Manuscript: 1 Corinthians 15:1-2

Outline:

Sermon Title: Holding Fast to the Gospel

Main Point One: The Gospel Paul Preached

Main Point Two: The Gospel We Received

Main Point Three: The Gospel that Enables Us to Stand

Main Point Four: The Gospel that Saves Us

INTRODUCTION:

About a month ago, I was with the youth group and we played a game of tug of war. Unfortunately, we lost. Three times. The objective of a game of tug of war as I am sure you know is to pull harder than the opposing team and to get the middle of the rope past a certain point. If you loosen your grip on the rope you give up ground and will ultimately lose. Having a tight, firm, grip on the rope is vital.

And that is Paul's concern in our passage as well. The Corinthian church was on the verge loosening their grip on the gospel. There were those of them who had loosened their grip morally and they had begun to tolerate all kinds of immoral practices to the point that they even approved of one who was sleeping with his father's wife. And doctrinally there were also some in the middle of the church that were pushing the church not to cling so tightly to the doctrine of the resurrection. In the midst of this Paul is urging the Corinthians in his letter to hold fast to the gospel. He says in verses one and two, the section that we will focus on this morning, *"I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you."*

The State of the Church in New Zealand

Isn't the broader church culture that we are part of in New Zealand not dissimilar from the church of Corinth? I think that the evangelical church in New Zealand has drastically loosened its grip on the gospel both morally and doctrinally. So, this week as we as a church enter into another year as a gospel-centered church in a broader New Zealand church culture that has tragically,

and often disastrously, loosened its grip I think that it is important that we like the Corinthians are reminded to hold fast to the gospel. We had a reminder from Peter last week to add to our faith and this week we have a reminder from Paul to hold fast to the gospel as we enter a new year.

Outline

If you're taking notes you can title your notes "Holding Fast to the Gospel." Paul mentions in these two verses four significant things about this gospel and these will form the outline of my sermon this morning. He identifies the gospel that they are to hold fast to as the one that Paul preached. He emphasizes their responsibility to hold fast to the gospel because they are the ones that received it. He urges them to hold fast to the gospel because it enables them to stand like a rock beneath their feet. Finally and most significantly, Paul explains that it is the gospel that is saving them. So if they let go of the gospel they lose the power of God to change their lives.

Let's consider these points in order. As we begin, let's consider the question: what is the gospel? In our terminology, even in well-meaning evangelical circles it is not always so clear what the gospel is. Well to answer that question we have to go back to the sources and ask "What did Paul mean when he used the word gospel?"

MAIN POINT ONE: The Gospel Paul Preached

Paul's Gospel

What is the gospel that Paul is "reminding" the Corinthians of in verse one? Well he identifies the gospel as the one "I preached to you." And fortunately for us, Paul doesn't leave his definition of the gospel ambiguous. He explains what the gospel that he preached to the Corinthians was just a few verses later. He tells us in verse three and following what the essentials of the gospel are. Read these verses with me, if you haven't found your way to our passage yet we are in 1 Corinthians 15 and it's found on [page 962](#) in the black pew bibles. Verse three,

"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 and that He

appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve, then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time."

The Gospel is Grounded on Historic Events

Paul's gospel is centered on three rock-solid historic events. It's not some groundless moral platitude. It didn't float down from the clouds or appear in the mind of a brilliant man's imagination. No the Christian message is grounded in historic events. There is substance behind it. It is built on something. The gospel exists because Christ suffered for our sins, died and was buried, and got back out of the grave to become, as Paul says 1 Corinthians 1, "wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" for those who are in him by faith (1 Corinthians 1:30). So in Paul's view the whole scope of the gospel is found in Christ. It is found in Christ in its past effects as He became your righteousness when you as a sinner believed in him, and its present effects as He becomes your sanctification as you discipline yourself, in its future effects as He becomes the redeemer of our bodies. Paul's stress here is that all of this flows out of three historic events. Let's look at these events quickly.

1. He says first, Christ died for our sins. What this means is that Christ took the punishment for the sins of all those who trust in him. Christ paid for our sins. We had rebelled against the God who is a good and just king over the universe. We had belittled His laws and insulted His dignity. And our transgression against His laws racked up for us a huge fine. Such a fine that we as mere men couldn't possibly pay and the only option was for us to suffer punishment in Hell for the evil that we had done. But Christ came to suffer and "die for our sins." He isn't a shady accountant who merely hides our expenses in layers of crafty paperwork and fake bank accounts. He outright paid for sins. The wages of sin is death and Christ died for our sins.
2. Second it says that He was buried. What Paul is pointing out here is that Christ was definitively dead. In a world prior to technology someone who was buried was thoroughly dead. It wasn't like the Romans hooked Christ up to a heart monitor as he was suffering on the cross. But burial was a sure sign for the early church that Christ had been definitively found to be dead. You don't bury people alive, you make sure that they are dead before you let them be buried. You remember as the soldiers were going around on Friday night to break the legs of the men on the cross so that they would suffocate and wouldn't be still hanging on the Sabbath. The

soldiers didn't break Jesus legs because they "saw that He already dead" (John 19: 33). And then to be extra sure one of the soldiers "pierced his side with a spear" (John 19:34). This is central to Christ's work because the law had said right from the garden that the one who sins must die. So to redeem us from the curse of the law Christ had to die. And his burial proves that He was definitively and actually dead. If you are going to build your life around someone who died and rose again you want to be pretty sure that they actually died and that it wasn't all just some big fake.

3. Thirdly, Paul says that Christ rose again. There are so many facets of how this event is significant in order for us to receive the gospel. But let's look at it in terms justification and redemption. Because Christ is alive when you recognized your sin and repented of it and trusted in Him it was like your bank accounts were linked. So now your debts are covered by Christ's payment at the cross and the riches of his righteous life are credited to your account and you have been given a checkbook of righteousness that you can use to boldly approach the father when you sin. That's what justification is it is payment for sin and a legal credit of righteousness. And justification can only happen but union with a living savior. You can't be united to someone who is dead. It's useless, that is what Paul is saying in verse 17, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." Similarly, if we are ever to have new bodies to live in forever, bodies that don't get cancer and get weary after a week of work and eventually die. We need to be united to a savior who has himself conquered death and been given a new body. That is what Paul is saying in verses 21 and 22, *"For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive."*

So these historic events form the backbone of the gospel that the apostle Paul preached when he first preached the gospel at Corinth. And because this gospel has far reaching consequences that extend beyond just God's grace to justify us when we trust Him. Paul writes to "remind" or your version might say "make known" the gospel to Christians. He wants them to understand that if they throw away the historic facts of the gospel they lose everything. You can't loosen your grip on the gospel without losing everything that Christianity is about because the Christian life past present and future is all about the gospel. It deals with you debts as you embrace Christ. It changes your heart as you

grow in Christ. And it provides you with a new body to live in a new and redeemed world that is completely under the Lordship of Christ. You see Christian if you lose Christ then you lose everything.

Do you know Christ?

I think right at the outset this morning it would be appropriate to ask you, do you know Christ? If as I was explaining the details of how the gospel changes everything it didn't really seem all that compelling, maybe it is because you haven't actually experienced the change brought about by the gospel. Maybe it doesn't seem much to you to lose Christ and all His benefits because you have never tasted His benefits. No one frets about losing something they have never had. It's appropriate as you begin a New Year and reevaluate plans to renovate your house, and your job situations, and your family life to also reevaluate those things that are as Paul says, "of first importance." The Paul commands the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5 "*examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Or do you not realize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you?—Unless indeed you fail to meet the test.*" There are multiple ways that the bible instructs us to test ourselves. You can watch closely your life over a couple of days or weeks so that you can see if you're actions as a whole reflect someone who has been given a new heart. You can test a tree by its fruit and see if the character of your life in all its attitudes reflect the fruit of the Holy Spirit. You might consider studying through first John this week and see if your life matches up with John's claims about those who have come to know him. I would encourage you to pursue one of these options this week. And I would like you to ask yourselves three quick question to take a quick check of your pulse. If you have a new heart it should have these three different types of love flowing from it. 1) Do you have a love for the Word of God, do you want unrestrained by family and social expectations to read it? Or does it seem like a burden? 2) Do you love God, not just knowledge about Him or Him as a philosophical concept but as you have seen His character revealed by the Word and in His faithfulness to you, have you fallen in love with Him? Or does He seem like a tyrant? 3) Do you love the people of God? Do you love the time that you get spend with them worshipping? Do you love the times when you share meals with them? Or does it seem frustrating and interfering to worship and fellowship with God's people? If you answered no to those questions you should strongly consider testing yourself further and talking to a Christian who knows your life well enough to offer insight and walk with you through the questions.

If you are not sure yet if you have really experienced the gospel let me ensure you that the church is the right place for you to because as Paul explains next it is the church that has been entrusted with the gospel.

MAIN POINT TWO: The Gospel We Received

We Have Been Entrusted with the Gospel

I said there that the church has been entrusted with the gospel. I get that from the very next reason Paul gives in verse one for reminding the Corinthians of the gospel. He says that the gospel is the one that the Corinthian church received. *“The gospel I preached to you, which you received.”* And the “you” used here is plural, that isn’t so clear in English and it might not have struck you as we read it through. But you can see that when you consider the context. Paul says *“I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel that I preached to you, which you received.”* The “you” used in all of these instances is plural the people he is talking to are the “brothers.” So I don’t think that Paul’s vision here is the individual conversions of the Corinthians. I think He is addressing the Corinthian church as stewards of the gospel and pointing out that as they received the gospel from the apostle’s so they are to keep it and guard it. Paul uses this kind of usage of the verb receiving in verse three too if you will look there, *“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.”* So I think Paul is pointing out the Corinthians obligations here and saying look you have a duty to hold onto the gospel. You have a duty to safe guard it and make sure that it is distributed like it was distributed to you. You have a duty to make sure the church continues to stand firm on the foundation of the gospel. You have received it and you have to make sure you have a gospel to pass on.

The Believer’s Responsibility: Moral and Doctrinal

Isn’t it easy to see here how this applies to us as a congregation in 2017. Paul here looks the church members of the Corinthian church in the eye and tells them you have an obligation to protect the gospel you received from the apostles. We too are a church, as Paul says in Ephesians two, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” So we too here at Covenant Grace have an obligation to keep a firm hold on the gospel that we have received. And notice that Paul doesn’t write this only to those in authority of the church, but he actually places the responsibility on the believers who are members of the church in Corinth. He

addresses “brothers.” So it is our responsibility as a body, and it is your responsibility as a believer in this church to ensure that we are looking after the gospel we received. I think the New Testament presents two ways that we are to keep and protect the gospel we have received. We are to keep the gospel morally and doctrinally. You might remember the verse of instruction that Paul gave Timothy from last week’s sermon, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearer.” Keeping a watch to make sure these two weeds are not springing up in our lives and in our churches are the way that we can make sure that the gospel is flourishing and changing lives in our church. We spent a lot of time on the moral aspects last week. So, let’s consider the doctrinal aspects this week. It is your responsibility as a Christian to ensure that your church is teaching the gospel that is why Paul spends 5 verses in this chapter explaining to the average Christian why the resurrection is important. So if you are going to keep the gospel you need to know theology so that you can distinguish false teaching from biblical doctrine.

The Importance of Confessions

Historically, the church across the world has confessions helpful to this end. As false teachers and heresy plagued the church, like they do today, the leaders from different churches meet together and outlined some of the basics of the Christian faith. So that as men rose up and said The Holy Spirit and Jesus are not fully divine the early believers got together and said no you can’t call yourself a Christian, and you lose your grip on the gospel, if you say that they are not divine. And as they rose up and said Jesus doesn’t have a human or doesn’t have a divine nature they said no Christ is 100 percent divine and 100 percent man, otherwise we lose the gospel. Confessions are how the church for almost two thousand years has kept the gospel.

Southern Seminary and Abstract of Principals

Confessions too have had a profound effect of the life of Southern Seminary where I am studying in Kentucky. The founders of the seminary, recognizing the decay in Baptist churches in the south, founded the seminary on the Abstract of Principals—a basic summary of Christian teaching, which is an abridged version of the 1689 Baptist Confession that our church uses. Students could come from any Christian denomination, but in order to teach there you had to agree with the Abstract of Principles. And early on it cost them deeply one of their brightest professors Crawford Toy, who had studied abroad at the

University of Berlin, and who began to doubt the inspiration and authority of the bible and ultimately became a Unitarian. As the founders of the seminary died, the school neglected its confessional roots and overlooked the theological divergences of its faculty. To the point that in 1976, just under 40 percent of the graduates who graduated didn't even believe that Jesus was the divine Son of God. Fortunately, 30 years ago the conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention finally managed to appoint Al Mohler as president of the seminary. In his first chapel message, entitled "Don't just do something stand there," he announced that the school was going to return to upholding the abstract of principals. By the end of the message the heads of every department were waiting at his door threatening their resignation if the school returned to the Abstract. So, he fired them on the spot. It wasn't long after the school neglected its confession that it lost the gospel and it wasn't long after it reclaimed it that the gospel began to be taught again.

And as the gospel was reclaimed the churches that the school was connected to were enabled to on Christ the solid rock. This is what Paul points to next in our passage this morning.

MAIN POINT THREE: The Gospel Enables Us to Stand

He says that the gospel is the context or place where the Corinthians have sure footing. It is the gospel, "in which [they] stand."

The Gospel A Viewing Platform

Think about this as the viewing platform you might see on a New Zealand walking track. Built by DOC or others along our walkways there are wooden viewing platforms that sit anchored into the rock on top of cliffs or overhanging rivers. And inside the parameter of this fence you are enabled to stand on sure ground. But outside of the viewing platform the ground is uncertain and the footing unclear.

C.S. Lewis's Apologetics

Likewise the gospel provides the Christian with ground in which they can stand and make sense of all of the peculiarities of life. This is what C.S. Lewis, formerly an Atheist, meant when he said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." The gospel helps us understand the memories of our past, the

phenomena of our present, and the uncertainty of the future. All of the events of our lives flow to us from a sovereign God who knows all of our needs and cares for us. He cares so much that He sent His Son. So as it says in Romans 8:31 and 32, *“If God be for us who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not with Him graciously give us all things?”*

The Gospel is Sure Footing in Suffering:

Think about this as you enter a new year with all of its uncertainties. Paul is telling you to hold fast to the gospel because this year that is what will enable you to stand. I don't know what it is that each of us is facing. Maybe you are facing decaying health as cancer threatens to rote away at your body and you know that this year holds for you physical pain that will push you to the edge of your faith. Where will you go for answers about God's affection towards you if you cannot go to the gospel, circumstance won't help you stand. Circumstance is against you. How will you find hope to endure if you can't look forward to a resurrected body? It is only the gospel that can offer answers to these kind of questions. No you must remember the words of the hymn, “How firm a foundation, Ye saints of the Lord is laid for your hope in His excellent Word, what more can He say than to you He has said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled,” and run to the gospel. Only there will you find firm ground to stand on.

The Gospel as Sure Footing through University

So eighteen year old, as you prepare to head off to university or dive into working life now is the time to ask yourself where the answers to life's biggest questions are found. I and two of my best friends were all converted as we asked these questions over our summer vacation after our last year of high school. Ask and search for the answer to questions like the problem of evil now so that you don't build your life on thin air. I am thoroughly convinced that you will find that only the gospel has answers to these kinds of deep questions.

Only the gospel can answer the questions and only the gospel can produce the life change that you know you need. This is what Paul is saying in the final point here.

MAIN POINT FOUR: The Gospel Saves Us

Paul says that only the gospel can save us in verse two, lets read that together, *“And by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.”*

How does the Gospel Save?

This verse might sound terrifying to you. As you look at it and think “Is Paul saying I might lose my salvation?” It all depends how narrow of a definition of salvation you bring to the table. Does your understanding of salvation only include justification or is it the fuller definition that Paul is bringing to the table? You remember I quoted at the earlier that at the start of this letter Paul said, Christ has “become for us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). Well this is Paul’s definition of salvation. It isn’t just justification. Right now the Corinthian are in the process of being saved through Christ who is their sanctification. So, as they study the gospel and pursue Christ-likeness they are “transformed from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Believing in Vain

So what does Paul mean then when he says in this verse, “Unless you believed in vain?” Is he saying that believers can lose their salvation if they walk away from the gospel? What do you think? Well the answer to this question is yes and no. And it depends what you mean by believers. The answer has to be yes because here Paul talks about a person who has believed. But notice that Paul roots the problem of those who do not hold fast to the word that he preached in their original faith. And notice what type of faith they had: they (in the past) “believed in vain.” Theirs was always a vain faith. It was always empty and substance-lacking faith that was going nowhere. So it was a fake faith that had never grappled with the real questions, but they had thought the whole time that they had had faith. This is the type of faith that will ultimately disappoint. And those who walk away demonstrate that they have this type of faith. Those who have truly believed the gospel keep on believing it and holding fast to it. Their faith is like a candle which though it may flicker is real and will endure. And more than that God keeps their flickering candle so that the winds of life do not blow it out. And He uses messages like this to do that. He uses Paul’s writing to instruct believers to hold fast to the gospel.

The Gospel is our Drug Rehabilitation Center

Don't you see that the gospel functions like a drug rehab center. It is the place that we as a church and we as junkies beat-up by the sin that we use to get ourselves high go to get clean. It is the gospel that freely provides for us a clean slate, and unearned food and accommodation. It is the gospel that now produces life change as we by the power of the spirit and the new desires that Christ has put in our heart turn away from the sin we were once addicted too. And it is the gospel that will give us a new life when God decides that our time on earth is done. Don't you see if you walk out the door and turn your back on the gospel you are turning your back on salvation in all its fullness to embrace the sin whose syringes have given you the aids that caused your body to deteriorate and shut down?

CONCLUSION

So I press on you individually and corporately as you start the New Year, and you see those who profess Christianity all over the show morally and doctrinally, hold fast to the gospel! You have a responsibility to steward in the way that you live and in the theology that you profess to keep it so that it flows untainted to the world around you as you evangelize and the church of future generations as you grow. Further, it is only here that you can find firm ground to stand on in as the winds and waves of 2017 assault us. And it is only here that you can be saved to the uttermost through Christ.

Let us Pray,