

My purpose in preaching this sermon is that a proper understanding of the gospel will move us to Christ-like obedience.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

What is the gospel?

I ask the question, of course, because this passage is all about Paul restating the gospel that he had already preached to the Corinthians. But if you took a random sampling of ten believers, how many do you think would echo Paul's proclamation that the gospel is that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, has been raised from the dead, and appeared to a multitude of witnesses?

I suppose, to be fair about it, we should recognize that the Bible states the gospel in other terms as well. The gospel of Luke, for instance, records in several places that Jesus preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God (4:43, 8:1). If we assume that Jesus and his apostles all preached the same gospel, then the gospel that Paul preached must have had something to do with the Kingdom of God, even though he doesn't say as much in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (but see also Acts 8:12). In Acts 10:36 we read that Peter "preached the gospel of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all." Perhaps this is why we have so many books – and so many more opinions – on exactly what the gospel is.

A fellow by the name of Greg Gilbert recently wrote a book called What is the Gospel? (2010, Crossway). In the introduction, Mr. Gilbert does a little survey work and provides for his readers some of the answers that he found to the question, "What is the gospel?" Here's a small sampling of the way that people have answered that question:

The good news is, God wants to show you his incredible favour. He wants to fill you with "new wine," but are you willing to get rid of your old wineskins?

Here's the gospel in a phrase. Because Christ died for us, those who trust in him may know that their guilt has been pardoned once and for all.

Good news! God is becoming King and he is doing it through Jesus! and therefore, phew! God's justice, God's peace, God's word is going to be renewed. And in the middle of that, of course, it's good news for you and me

My understanding of Jesus' message is that he teaches us to live in the reality of God now – her and today. It's almost as if Jesus just keeps saying, "Change your life. Live this way."

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So, what is the gospel? How would you answer the question? Perhaps one of the difficulties that we face is that we probably tend to state the gospel in terms of the effect that it has on us. I mean that in a positive kind of way; the gospel of Jesus ought to affect us in a number of different ways. It ought to bring us joy; it ought to bring us to repentance. The gospel will cause us both to weep and to celebrate. The gospel of Jesus both satisfies us completely and causes us to hunger for more. The gospel is effective; and we ought to be much affected by it. This is the reason why I believe that Paul states the gospel in these particular terms here in 1 Corinthians: there is something about the gospel that the Corinthians have not yet properly understood, and because of their lack of understanding, they have not yet been affected as they ought to have been. That thing that the Corinthians have not yet properly understood is the resurrection, so Paul now states the gospel in terms that emphasize that the resurrection is essential to the gospel.

The resurrection is essential to the gospel.

There are two things I want to point out about this passage. One thing is really obvious, but we'll talk about it a little bit anyway. The second thing is almost completely hidden in our English translations, and we'll deal with that one first.

Our English translations all say something like this: Jesus died, was buried, and rose – or, was raised – on the third day. What we don't see is that Paul uses a different verb tense for "rose" – or, "was raised" – than he does for "died" and "was buried." When Paul writes of the resurrection, he uses the perfect tense. The perfect tense indicates an action completed in the past with a continuing effect on the present. So, we might translate it more accurately here as, "he has been raised." I suppose that none of our translations have this rendering because it sounds very awkward in English to say that "he has been raised on the third day." It's awkward because "on the third day" points toward one particular point in time, but "he has been raised" shows us that the action of being raised is something that continues into the present. But that awkwardness in English is exactly the point that Paul is here making. Jesus died – but his death is not the present reality – and he was buried – but his burial is not the present reality either. However, Jesus has been raised on the third day – and his resurrection is the present reality of who Jesus is.

Let me see if I can illustrate the difference between "was" and "has been." If I were to ask Juliette how many years she was a student at Schuler School, she would answer, "I was a student at Schuler School for ten years." But if I asked Anna that same question, not only would she answer the question differently; I would ask it differently, too. I would ask, "Anna, how long have you been a student at Schuler?" And she would answer, "I have been a student at Schuler for six years." Juliette *was* a student at Schuler for ten years, because she is no longer a student at Schuler; Anna *has been* at Schuler for six years because she still is at Schuler. "Was" means "over and done with, no longer"; "has been" means "continuing on into the present time."

Jesus died, but that happened in the past and he is dead no longer. Jesus was buried, but that happened in the past and he is longer buried. Jesus has been raised from the dead, and his resurrection continues to this day with effect on the present situation. By writing the resurrection verb in the perfect tense, Paul is emphasizing the place of the resurrection in the gospel narrative; without the resurrection, the gospel is only about things that have happened in the past. The resurrection is essential to the gospel.

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I suppose it might be foolish to base a whole sermon on one verb tense. The truth is that verb tenses tend to be used somewhat fluidly, and are governed by general rules that are frequently ignored and broken. If Paul means what I believe he means by using the perfect tense, “he has been raised,” then that interpretation should be supported by the context in which that verb occurs.

And it certainly is.

These fifty-eight verses of chapter fifteen are devoted to the explanation of why the resurrection is absolutely essential to the gospel. Paul spends more ink on the resurrection than he does on the divisions in the church and work of the apostles in chapters three and four. There is more about the resurrection than about sexual immorality and lawsuits among believers combined in chapters five and six. As contentious as the issue of marriage was in Corinth, Paul says less about that than he does about the resurrection. If we take chapters eight, nine, and ten together, Paul says only a little more about the necessity of abstaining from idol worship than does about the resurrection. Only when it comes to gibing instructions about the work of the Holy Spirit in their worship gatherings (taking chapters twelve to fourteen together) does Paul say more about any one thing than he does about the resurrection. As I read it, I am inclined to believe that this discussion on the resurrection is the climax of the letter – it is the capstone that holds the church in place.

The resurrection is essential to the gospel. This Paul’s point as he comes to the end of this letter. As we think about this emphasis on the resurrection, one of the questions that we ought to be asking ourselves is whether the version of the gospel that we believe requires the resurrection. One of the things that I have sometimes wondered about is whether the atoning work of Jesus would be just as effective without the resurrection.

Wouldn’t the atoning work of Jesus be just as effective without the resurrection?

When we take about the atonement, what we are about is forgiveness. We say that Jesus has atoned for our sins, meaning that he is the sacrifice that has paid the penalty for our sins. But is that the whole of the gospel? And if the whole of the gospel is that the sacrifice of Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, has paid the penalty for our sins, the what makes the resurrection so essential to the gospel? Weren’t our sins paid for – atoned for - when Jesus died? Why then is the resurrection essential to the gospel?

We could certainly go to Hebrews and see how the resurrection of Jesus has made him a high priest forever. The point there is that because Jesus died and was raised from the dead, he cannot die again. And because he cannot die again, whoever Jesus is he is forever without fail or end. That’s a beginning to the answer to the question of whether the atoning work of Jesus would be as effective without the resurrection. Jesus certainly is forgiveness for ours without fail or end; but Jesus is much more than that, which is what the author of Hebrews also goes on to explain.

I have begun to realize that questioning or arguing whether the sacrifice of Jesus would be just as effective without the resurrection misses the point and force of the gospel of Jesus. The reason why the resurrection is essential to the gospel is that the gospel of Jesus is about much more than forgiveness. To say that the gospel is about forgiveness is like saying that farming is about driving a tractor that eating supper is about sitting at the table. In this same kind of way, forgiveness is certainly *part* of the gospel, and an essential part of the gospel, but it is by no means the *whole* gospel.

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What, then, is the *whole* gospel? I hesitate to think that I – or anyone else – could give a definition of the whole gospel in anything less than at least several hours, so I'll say it this way: Whatever the whole gospel is, it necessarily includes both forgiveness from sins *and* freedom from the power of sin. This is precisely where Paul ends up at the end of this chapter: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 55-56).

The whole gospel is both forgiveness from sins *and* freedom from the power of sin. And freedom from the power of sin produces fruit of Christ-like obedience.

The resurrection of Jesus empowers Christ-like obedience.

That's why the resurrection is essential to the gospel: the gospel of Jesus Christ is that, having been forgiven of our sins, we are also empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a life of righteousness. When we understand this, then we can understand why Paul puts this emphasis on the resurrection at the end of the letter. At nearly every point along the way throughout the letter, Paul has challenged the Corinthians' behaviour. Whether regarding the factionalism in their church or their ignorance of the blatant sin of other church members; whether because of their penchant for lawsuits or their appetite for feasts of idol worship; whether due to their competition in worship or shameful disrespect for others, Paul challenges their behaviour. And if the gospel of Jesus is only about forgiveness, we can hear the Corinthians objecting to every point Paul makes, saying to themselves, “Well, perhaps I shouldn't, but I've been forgiven and my eternal destiny is secure, so why does it really matter if I do?” Paul's response to the Corinthians is something like this: “If you think that what you do or don't do doesn't matter, then it is clear that you don't believe in the resurrection; and if you don't believe in the resurrection, then you have believed in vain.” If you don't believe in the resurrection, then you don't believe in the gospel of Jesus.

The resurrection of Jesus empowers Christlike obedience. That's why Paul ends his discussion of the resurrection with both the command and the reminder: “Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord” (that's the command), “for you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain” (that's the reminder). And it's not just here that Paul writes this kind of thing about the resurrection. In Romans 8:9-11, Paul writes, “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit And if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, but your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who lives in you.” The gospel of Jesus does not just provide forgiveness for sins; that was provided through the law in the Old Testament. But the law was powerless to provide freedom from the power of sin. That is what makes the gospel of Jesus such good news: we have been forgiven of our sins *and*, by the power of the resurrection, we have been liberated from the power of sin so that we may live lives of righteousness to God.

What is the gospel? Whatever words we might use to communicate the gospel in whatever various circumstances, we must remember that the resurrection is an essential component of the gospel. The gospel of Jesus is both forgiveness of our sins *and* freedom from the power of sin.