

A Healthy Church

Gospel-centeredness * 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

So, we're in a new year and that means you might be making an effort – at least for a little while – to get healthier. Maybe you're trying to get more sleep, or to work out, or to eat more fruits and veggies and less carbs and fats. Or maybe you're trying to establish some healthier financial practices or cutting back on your media intake. Maybe you're trying to find a better work-life balance. And hopefully you're committed to getting healthier spiritually this year through more regular Bible reading, times of prayer, and/or church and Community Group attendance.

I've made a number of resolutions for this new year, and I was going to share them with you, but then I got to thinking that I don't really want 1,500 accountability partners. I don't want you coming up to me at Walmart and asking how my diet is going – especially as I know that come February it probably won't be going well at all, if this week was any indication. Some of you know what I'm talking about, don't you? I bet you do.

But all light-heartedness aside, it's good to be healthy, amen? It's good for us individually and it's also good for us as a church, and that's why as we kickoff of 2023 we're going to do a short series on the marks or characteristics of a healthy church. Now, we may have a good grasp on what makes for an unhealthy church, seeing as how many of us have been a part of one at some point in our lives. Many of us have what's known as church hurt – or at least we know people who do and therefore are familiar with the kind of church that causes it. But while it's good to know what makes for an unhealthy church, what's better is to know what makes for a healthy one, so we can a) know what kind of church we should join and b) once we've joined, do our part to see that the church is truly a healthy one.

So, we're going to start this series in 1 Corinthians 15, and while you're turning there, I want to point out two things we need to keep in mind as we walk through this series. These are really important introductory points, so please listen carefully here.

No church is perfectly healthy.

The first is that no church is perfectly healthy. I've told you this numerous times before, but if you ever find what you think is a perfect church, please don't go there because the moment you walk in the door it will no longer be perfect.

In reality, though, no church is perfectly healthy because there are no perfectly healthy people. And this includes me – something that's become abundantly clear to me over the last couple of years. I guess you could also say there are no perfect churches because there are no perfect pastors – and again that certainly includes me. But here's the comfort we can find in the fact that we all have a degree of unhealth. In Mark 2:17 Jesus says this:

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” Mark 2:17 (ESV)

Jesus came for unhealthy people; for people like you and me. And that means we don’t need to look to be a perfectly healthy church, it just means we need to pursue the things that will enable us to be as healthy as possible – or maybe I should say *the person* that will enable us to be as healthy as possible, and of course, and as we’re going to talk about a lot over the coming weeks, that person is Jesus.

We are the church.

The second introductory point is that *we* are the church. The church isn’t an organization we belong to, it’s an organism we’re a part of. One of the primary New Testament metaphors for the church is the human body, with the different parts of the body representing the members of the church. So, just as a healthy body consists of healthy parts, so too does a healthy church consist of healthy members. This means that in talking about the marks of a healthy church we’re also talking about the marks of a healthy church member; what makes for a healthy church are the same things that make for healthy members. The point: don’t separate your health from the health of the church; they’re inseparably connected to one another.

Gospel-centeredness

Now, that said, the first and foremost mark of a healthy church is gospel-centeredness. It’s a church in which everything is centered on the gospel. And I do literally mean everything. Everything the church believes. Everything the church teaches. Everything the church practices. Everything the church gives itself to. In a healthy church, all of these things have the gospel as their foundation and focus. Another way to say it is that a healthy church is one that’s all about the gospel.

There are two reasons why this is the case.¹

1. The gospel is the only thing that brings salvation.

Number one, the gospel is the only thing that brings salvation. In Romans 1:16, the Apostle Paul says that he’s not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. So, if people are going to be saved, the gospel has to be proclaimed. And not just occasionally, but regularly and repeatedly. This should begin in the pulpit, but it shouldn’t end there. It should happen in classrooms, in ministries, in community groups, and even in the places where we live, work, and play. We proclaim the gospel here, and then we go out and proclaim the gospel there, wherever there may be. And again, we do so because without the gospel people are lost, without any hope of salvation. The gospel must be front and center at all times because it’s the only remedy for a lost and dying world. It’s the only thing that can make sick people healthy; it’s the only thing that can bring lost people salvation.

¹ <https://summitchurch.com/GetFile.ashx?Guid=e5f9f45a-14a4-4b96-b6b8-7c0114cdc136>

2. The gospel is the only thing that brings transformation.

Number two, the gospel is the only thing that brings transformation. Not only is the gospel is the only thing than can save us, it's also the only thing that can change us once we're saved.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul writes this:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. 2 Corinthians 3:18 (ESV)

If we want to be changed into the image of Jesus, if we want to experience more and more glory in our lives, there's only one way to see it happen, and that's by looking at Jesus – by beholding *his* glory. And where do we behold the glory of Jesus? Come on...you can see where I'm leading you, right? We behold the glory of Jesus in the gospel. As we dive into the gospel and immerse ourselves in it, not just once, but over and over again, it transforms us so that we change and become more and more like Jesus.

Let me emphasize that this is the only way transformation occurs. We won't be changed by entertaining messages or great music or captivating books or inspiring ministries or fun events or nice people – all of those are great but none of them can change us – only the gospel can do that, and that's why again, we want to be about the gospel above all.

So, here's what all of this means; it means we need to be rock solid on what the gospel is. There's a direct relationship between the health of a church and the gospel-centeredness of a church. The more gospel-centered a church is, the healthier it will be. And being a gospel-centered church begins with having a clear understanding of the gospel, and so let's make sure we know what the gospel is. To that end, let's now look at the first 11 verses of 1 Corinthians 15. You've been wondering when I was going to get to it, so here we go, follow along as I read.

Three Big Picture Truths About the Gospel

I want to begin by highlighting three big picture truths about the gospel.

The Gospel is News, Not Advice

One, while you probably know that the word gospel means good news, do you realize that it is in fact news, and not advice? In other words, the gospel doesn't tell us what we need to do to be saved, but rather what God has done to bring us salvation. This is why in v. 11 & 12 Paul uses the word *grace* three times as a synonym for the gospel. The gospel is the good news of God's gracious gift of salvation.

By the way, this is what separates true Christianity from every other religion in the world, including the religions of self-actualization, self-expression, and self-improvement. They all say we're saved by what we do, Christianity says we're saved by what God has done. And this truly is good news, isn't it? Isn't it good news to know that you don't have to save yourself, but rather can be saved simply by believing in what God has done?

The Gospel is for Everyone

Two, the gospel is for everyone. In v. 9 Paul says he's unworthy to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church. The book of Acts tells us that not too many years before Paul wrote this, he was, and I quote, "breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."² He was literally murdering Christians. And yet here in 1 Corinthians 15 we see that the gospel was even for him. In 1 Timothy 1 Paul says that God saved him in order to show that no one is beyond saving.³ That if God is willing to save such an egregious sinner like him, then God is willing to save anyone. So, hear this today: Jesus came to save you. It doesn't matter what you've done, the good news of God's grace is for you.

The Gospel is Priority #1

Three, the gospel is priority #1. In verse 3 Paul says it's the matter of first importance. I want you to consider how significant of a statement this is. Paul wrote nearly half of the New Testament, meaning he wrote lots of really important things. In fact, in saying the gospel is the matter of first importance, he's indicating that there are other important things. But while there are other important things, Paul makes it clear that the gospel is at the very top of the list, and everything else comes in a distant second.⁴ We can see this even more clearly in 1 Corinthians 2:2 where Paul tells the Corinthians that he had decided to know nothing among them but Jesus Christ and him crucified. This doesn't mean Paul didn't talk to the Corinthians about anything else; we know that because he talks about a lot of other things in 1 and 2 Corinthians. It just means that everything else he said was centered on and flowed from the gospel. All this to say that the gospel is the most important thing and therefore a healthy church makes it priority #1.

A Gospel Summary

Now, with those three things in mind, in verses 3 and 4 Paul gives a succinct summary of the gospel. He gives the gospel in a nutshell, or we might say the gospel in a Tweet or a Snapchat.

² Acts 9:1

³ 1 Timothy 1:15-16

⁴ <https://summitchurch.com/GetFile.ashx?Guid=e5f9f45a-14a4-4b96-b6b8-7c0114cdc136>

I want to point out that in a real sense the whole Bible is the gospel and that there are numerous places where the Biblical authors, most notably Paul, give a much more exhaustive explanation of the gospel. In February we're going to begin a 14-month study of Romans, where Paul expounds the gospel in all of its glorious detail. That's going to be great, and I can't wait, but here in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul summarizes the gospel in just nine words. He says the gospel is *Christ died for our sins and rose again*. Look at v. 3 & 4 again. So again, the key words are *Christ died for our sins and rose again*.

Now, in order to make this as simple for you as possible, I'm going to boil it down even further. I'm going to give you a three-word summary of Paul's nine-word summary. The gospel can be understood using these words: Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection. That's what Christ died for our sins and rose again is about. It's about the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Let's talk about each of these.

Incarnation

First, Incarnation. When Paul says Christ, he isn't referring to Jesus' last name, but rather to his title, to the fact that he's the Messiah, he's God come in the flesh. So, the gospel begins with the truth that the man Jesus is also God. He's fully man and fully God in one person.

Crucifixion

Second, Crucifixion. The God-man Jesus Christ died for our sins on a Roman cross. The word *for* in v. 3 means on *behalf of*.⁵ This is what we talked about on Christmas Eve – Jesus Christ died in our place, as our substitute. It's critical that we understand why this is necessary. It's necessary because we're sinners, all of us. Paul says that Christ died for *our* sins, but we need to read it personally – Christ died for *my* sins.

I've rebelled against God and therefore deserve the punishment of death. And yes, physical death, but more significantly, spiritual death – eternal separation from God in hell. This is true for me, and it's true for all of you.

However, the gospel says that the God-man Jesus Christ experienced hell in our place so our sin can be forgiven, and we can be reunited to God – forever. 1 Peter 3:18 explains it perfectly:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. 1 Peter 3:18a (ESV)

Because of our sin we were separated from God, but Jesus took the suffering we deserve and now through faith in him we're restored to God and restored to him forever. Anybody want to say amen to that?

⁵ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). In [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, pp. 801–802). United Bible Societies.

Resurrection

Amen and amen, but that's not all; there's Incarnation, there's Crucifixion, and finally there's Resurrection. After Jesus Christ died and was buried, he rose again on the third day. The Resurrection is actually Paul's emphasis in 1 Corinthians 15, as it appears that some members of the church at Corinth were denying or at least questioning the resurrection of the dead. And so, you will note that Paul goes to pains in v. 5-8 to give evidence that Jesus really did rise from the grave. One author points out that these are Paul's footnotes;⁶ he's saying, if you want to verify that Jesus rose from the dead, there are literally hundreds of people you can talk to. Hundreds of people who saw him, heard him, touched him. 1 Corinthians was likely written within 20 years of Jesus' death, and this means there were many people still alive who had seen Jesus post-resurrection. And Paul says if you don't believe me, go to talk to them. They can verify that the Resurrection truly happened; they can validate that it's a historical fact.

But that said, why is the Resurrection essential to the gospel? Well, it's essential because it means at least four things.

1. Jesus is who he claimed to be.

One, it means Jesus is who he claimed to be. In Romans 1:4 Paul writes that:

[Jesus] was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead. Romans 1:4 (ESV)

Jesus claimed to be God in the flesh, and his resurrection substantiates that this is the case. How do we know that the Jewish man who lived 2,000 years ago is also God? We know it because he said he would come back from the dead and he did.

2. God accepted Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf.

Two, the Resurrection means that God accepted Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf.

In Romans 4:25 Paul writes that:

[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Romans 4:25 (ESV)

Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, and he was raised from the dead to show that God had accepted his payment on our behalf. The Resurrection proves that our debt has been paid in full.

⁶ Richard Bauckham. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*.

Let me share an extremely practical application here. Whenever you're struggling to believe that you're forgiven, go to the Resurrection. When the devil tempts you to despair and tells you of the guilt within, run to the Resurrection and remind yourself that because it's true, so is your forgiveness. Don't get caught up in what you have or haven't done; get caught up in what God has done through the Cross and Resurrection, namely the forgiveness of your sins; past, present and future.

3. Those who believe the gospel are given a new life that is free from bondage to sin.

Three, the resurrection means that those who believe the gospel are given a new life that's free from bondage to sin.

In Romans 6:4 Paul writes that:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. Romans 6:4 (ESV)

When we believe the gospel, we're united to Jesus in his death and resurrection so that just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so too are we raised to a new life. A new life that Paul goes on to say in v. 7 is free from sin. And by free from sin, he doesn't mean that we no longer struggle with it, he means that it's no longer in control. It means that we now can experience victory over it and find freedom from its enslaving power.

4. Sin and death have been defeated.

Fourth, the resurrection means that sin and death have been defeated. I want you to look at how Paul wraps up 1 Corinthians 15. After defending the Resurrection and explaining its implications for more than 40 verses, he concludes in v. 55-57 with this:

*"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
1 Corinthians 15:55-57 (ESV)*

The Resurrection means that sin and death don't have the last word, Jesus does. And do you know what Jesus' last word is? His last word is *resurrection*. You see, one day Jesus is coming back, and when he does those who've believe the gospel will experience a resurrection like his. Jesus will raise us from the dead just like God raised him, and he will give us a new, perfect, imperishable, glorious body just like his. A new, perfect, imperishable, glorious body that will live on a new earth with our glorious God forever.

So, that's the gospel. Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection.

Now, I know you might feel like you've been drinking from a fire hose, so let me close with some simple application. Here's my final charge to you today. In light of what we've talked about, we should believe the gospel and keep on believing the gospel.

The gospel is the greatest news ever and all other good news pales in comparison. You will never hear anything better than what you've heard this morning. And yet for the gospel to make a difference in our lives, we have to believe it and then we have to keep on believing it. Paul says we're saved as we received the gospel and keep holding fast to it.

So, if you've never believed the gospel, believe it today and be saved. It really is that simple. Believe that Jesus is the God-man who died for you sins and rose again, and if you do, your sins will be forgiven, your new life will begin, and you can know that one day you're going to experience a resurrection like Jesus.

If you've already believed the gospel, though, don't ever stop believing it. Study it day in and day out. Preach it to yourself day in and day out. Be a part of church that proclaims it day in and day out. Center your life on the gospel, striving to make sure everything you do flows from it – your work, your play, your dating, your parenting, your marriage – because this is the one and only way to be a healthy Christian and it's the one and only way that we will be a healthy church. Let's pray.

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