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Sermon Notes

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The Unchanging Facts of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

One of the constant aspects of our lives in this world is CHANGE...
everything is changing around us all the time

Current events seem to move with lightning rapidity

Technologies emerge seemingly out of nowhere, and then they
themselves are soon obsolete

Sports teams win championships, but within a year they are
dethroned by some other team, and the t-shirt you bought
begins to fade in the wash

Friends come and go from the church... they move away

Children grow up so quickly, and then they are gone... moved to
another city to begin their adult lives

But as this world is a swirling tilt-a-whirl merry-go-round, it is
wonderful to know that the Word of God is unchanged and
unchanging

And the centerpiece of the unchanging word of God is the gospel,
based on the facts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus
Christ

***Matthew 24:35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never
pass away.***

As we come this morning to a new chapter in 1 Corinthians, we are looking at perhaps one chapter in the entire New Testament that stands alone better than any other... it teaches one main concept, and then powerfully applies that concept to our lives of service to Christ

The one main concept:

1 Corinthians 15:20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

The one main application:

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

I. The Gospel is Our Top Priority

A. The Context in Corinth

1. A series of significant problems in a local church he planted
2. The entire epistle has been comprised of Paul addressing those problems
3. Chapters 1-3: It began with their factions and divisions based on human wisdom
4. Chapter 4: The desire the Corinthians had to be successful in the world's eyes... to be liked and accepted by a world that crucified Christ and persecutes his apostles
5. Chapters 5-6: moral problems in the Corinthian church; sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers
6. Chapter 7: marriage problems... divorce, singleness, purity
7. Chapters 8-10: food sacrificed to idols
8. Chapter 11: problems with the Lord's Supper
9. Chapters 12-14: problems with the use of spiritual gifts

10. Now... problems with doctrine concerning resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:12 ... some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

This almost certainly comes from their philosophical pre-commitments

Greek philosophers had a range of beliefs about the possibility of life after death or of the immortality of the soul... not everyone believed the same thing. But Plato in particular and his followers looked on the body as something of a prison for the pure soul, and death was seen as a release from that prison. Why would anyone want to come back and be incarcerated again in this world of sorrow, hunger, pain, and death?

We get some sense of the views that Paul's Greek contemporaries had about the resurrection from the dead by how they reacted to Paul when he preached in Athens as recorded in Acts 17. There Paul preached Christ to a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers

The Epicureans denied the immortality of the soul... this life is all there is, and when you die, you die... that's it!

Epicurus said: "Death is nothing to us; for the body, when it has been resolved into its elements, has no feeling; and that which has no feeling is nothing to us."

Epicureans believed also that the soul itself is made up of atoms like the body. So when the body dies, the soul is dissolved.

This doesn't sound much different than what the atheist genius physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking said before he died:

"I have lived with the prospect of an early death for the last 49 years. I'm not afraid of death, but I'm in no hurry to die. I have so much I want to do first. I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven

or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairytale for people afraid of the dark.”

John Lennox answered: “Atheism is a fairytale for people afraid of the light!!”

So, when Paul preached to the Greek philosophers, this was their immediate reaction:

Acts 17:32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered

Therefore, some of this doctrine was infecting the minds of the Corinthian Christians... as is clearly seen from vs. 12

B. Our Context

1. Some things are new, but some things will never change
2. New things: 2020 has been an incredibly challenging year
 - a. COVID-19 has reminded people again of the fragility of life and the brevity of life
 - b. The virus spread like wildfire and sheltering at home orders devastated the economy worldwide; people realized how quickly things can change
 - c. The death totals from the virus were constantly projected by mainstream media, never allowing anyone to forget that this coronavirus is deadly
 - d. Beyond that, the death of George Floyd and the following demonstrations have focused attention on human sinfulness and forced people again to ask ultimate questions
 - e. These events are current... but the basic issues are the same
3. As Job put it plainly:

Job 14:14 If a man dies, will he live again?

4. Beyond that, there is the constant fear of death

Hebrews 2:15 all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death

5. Eternity is in our hearts

Ecclesiastes 3:11 [God] has also set eternity in the hearts of men

6. But we see the reality of death around us all the time... people die and we never see them again in this world

C. Paul Felt the Need to Go Back to the Basics... and to Reassert the TOP PRIORITY of the Gospel

1. "As of first importance"...

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures

2. This is the top priority for the church and for every single individual

a. There are many fascinating doctrines that could take tons of our time to investigate

The millennium ... predestination... the nation of Israel...

b. But there is no priority higher than this simple gospel message... it is of FIRST IMPORTANCE

c. That's why Paul used this language earlier in 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 2:2 I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

The gospel is of FIRST IMPORTANCE for every individual; and so it must be the top priority for our church as well

3. Why? Because of the infinite worth of the human soul

Matthew 16:26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

4. Because death is inevitable, as is judgment

Hebrews 9:27 It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment

5. Judgment Day is the perfect evaluation of everything we have ever done in the body by the holy eyes of God

Habakkuk 1:13 [God's] eyes are too pure to look on evil; [He] cannot tolerate wrong.

Hebrews 4:13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Matthew 12:36 But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken

Revelation 20:11-15 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books...: If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

6. So the gospel is of FIRST IMPORTANCE... top priority... because it alone is our only hope of surviving Judgment Day

Romans 1:16-17 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

D. Therefore, Paul Reminds the Corinthians of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 15:1 Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.

1. Actually the Greek does not say “remind”, but “make known”

2. But he says 1) he already preached it to them before and 2) on that gospel they have already taken their stand
3. So “remind” is a good sense of what Paul is doing here
 - a. The basic gospel is BASIC... you’ve heard it before
 - b. But you will never be done needing to hear this message...
Christ the sinless substitute, who died on the cross for our sins and rose again for our life
 - c. We need to hear it as long as we are still in this world
 - d. Our salvation is a PROCESS... and the gospel message continues to work in us our full salvation until we are finally in heaven and out of danger
 - e. So all faithful pastors must continually remind the people of the gospel
 - f. This is the GROUND every Christian is standing on... this is the unshakable rock under your feet. You need to know it every moment of every day

E. Each Christian Has to Continue to HOLD FIRMLY to the Gospel Message

1 Corinthians 15:2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

1. The faith we had in Christ at the beginning of our Christian lives must continue until we die
2. Paul is effectively WARNING the Corinthian Christians that they need to KEEP STANDING FIRMLY on this gospel, keep HOLDING FAST to it until they are safely out of this world
3. To “believe in vain” means to have a faulty faith, like James mentions... a dead faith or demon faith or deluded faith
4. True faith PERSEVERES to the end of life
5. So, Paul goes back over the basic facts of the gospel message

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures

II. The Gospel is Founded on Scripture's Testimony of Christ

A. Notice that Paul Says He RECEIVED this Gospel Message

1. He makes it very plain that the gospel message is heaven-sent

Galatians 1:11-12 I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. ¹² I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

2. God revealed Jesus Christ to Paul on the Road to Damascus... and then taught him the gospel doctrine directly by revelation
3. This revelation, however, was totally based on SCRIPTURE
 - a. Christ died for our sins ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE
 - b. Christ was buried
 - c. Christ was raised from the dead ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE
4. This is vital because it shows us how the facts of the gospel are tied directly to the unchanging WORD OF GOD
5. The link between Christ and the scriptures was strongly established by Jesus Christ himself in his teaching, both before and after his resurrection

John 5:39-40 You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

John 5:46 If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.

Luke 24:25-27 He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

6. Paul first heard of this scriptural witness to Jesus I believe from the inspired witness of Stephen... Acts 6
7. These scriptural arguments of Jesus' status as the Messiah sent from heaven were the basis of Paul's ministry from the very beginning

Acts 9:19-22 Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. ²⁰ At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. ²¹ All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²² Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

B. Most Important Prophecies About Christ's Life, Death and Resurrection

1. Christ's status as the incarnate Son of God, greater than his father David (Psalm 110:1-2)

Matthew 22:42-45 For David says, ⁴⁴ "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" ⁴⁵ If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?"

2. Christ's death as a substitute for our sins (Isaiah 53)

Isaiah 53:4-6 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

3. Christ's death by crucifixion (Psalm 22)

Psalm 22:14-18 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. ¹⁵ My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. ¹⁶ Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. ¹⁷ I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. ¹⁸ They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.

4. Christ's resurrection from the dead (Psalm 16)

Psalm 16:10 you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.

5. Christ as the divine Son of Man, worthy to receive worship (Daniel 7:13-14)

These unchanging prophecies were written CENTURIES before Christ was born

They are the unshakable foundation to the gospel, and they are fulfilled in space and time... in history... by Jesus Christ

His direct fulfillment of these prophecies is the centerpiece of the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – giving we who read even millennia later the faith we need for our salvation

III. Christ's Resurrection is Vital to the Gospel

A. Central to Paul's Purpose Here: Christ's Resurrection from the Dead is VITAL to the Gospel

1. This is the unifying theme of the entire chapter
2. As we've seen in verse 12, there were some Corinthians saying that there IS NO RESURRECTION from the dead... it is a physical and philosophical IMPOSSIBILITY
3. But Paul will write for 58 amazing verses on how vital it is that Christ rose from the dead

4. He will make many arguments for Christ's resurrection
5. The most basic is, the scriptures predicted it... as we've seen
6. But the second is that MANY EYEWITNESSES SAW IT

B. The Eyewitnesses Listed

1 Corinthians 15:5-8 he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

1. Eyewitnesses are vital to any fact being established in Jewish law

Deuteronomy 19:15 A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

2. So it is also for any historical event; the moment can never be recreated again; but the truth is established by evidence, especially eyewitness testimony
3. Two or three was enough... Paul lists people by name who saw him... Peter, James, the Twelve
4. The Apostles in particular had as a central job description testifying to the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead

Acts 1:22 one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

5. James in particular was fascinating... the Lord Jesus' brother, who had not believed in Jesus, became an ardent follower of Jesus as the Son of God and the pillar of the church in Jerusalem
6. Five hundred eyewitnesses... STILL ALIVE! You can talk to them still, Paul was saying to the Corinthians

C. William Lane Craig's four basic universally agreed-upon facts

1. Jesus was entombed by Joseph of Arimathea in a specific tomb
2. That tomb was empty on the third day after Jesus death by crucifixion

3. Jesus appeared to people after his death who testified that they saw him alive
4. All the early disciples believed in and proclaimed Christ's resurrection from the dead (even to people in Jerusalem)

Craig said any attempt at an adequate historical hypothesis must address these four facts

"This puts the skeptical critic in a rather desperate situation. A few years ago I participated in a debate on the resurrection of Jesus with a professor at the University of California, Irvine. He had written his doctoral dissertation on the resurrection, and he was thoroughly familiar with the evidence. He could not deny the facts of Jesus' honorable burial, empty tomb, post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in the resurrection. So his only recourse was to come up with some alternate explanation of those facts. And so he argued that *Jesus of Nazareth had an unknown, identical twin brother*, who was separated from him as an infant and grew up independently, but who came back to Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, stole Jesus' body out of the tomb, and presented himself to the disciples, who mistakenly inferred that Jesus was risen from the dead! Now I won't bother to go into how I went about refuting this theory."

[\[https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/jesus-of-nazareth/the-resurrection-of-jesus/\]](https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/jesus-of-nazareth/the-resurrection-of-jesus/)

Craig pointed out that many skeptics who try to debunk Christianity end up falling on their faces before this evidence.

"The evidence [for Christ's resurrection] is so powerful that one of the world's leading *Jewish* theologians, the late Pinchas Lapide, who taught at Hebrew University in Israel, declared himself convinced on the basis of the evidence that the God of Israel raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead!"

D. Application:

1. In our proclamation of the gospel to the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill region, we need to make certain that we make the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead the centerpiece
2. It is thrilling to be able to give people HOPE in the face of the one undefeated enemy of the human race—DEATH

IV. The Gospel of Grace Saved and Commissioned Paul

1 Corinthians 15:8-10 ... last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

A. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead Transformed Paul Himself

1. Paul's story is well attested to both in the book of Acts and in his own epistles
2. He was a ladder-climbing Pharisee, known in Jewish circles as Saul of Tarsus, trained in Jewish theology by Gamaliel; he was passionate for Judaism, extremely zealous for the traditions of the Jewish ancestors, excelling in Judaism far beyond any one else of his day
3. He was among a group of Jews who debated Stephen in the synagogue of the freedmen, but who lost that debate... unable to answer or refute Stephen... he consented to his death; after Stephen's death, Saul began to destroy the church... going from house to house he dragged off men and women and threw them in prison
4. He obtained letters from the chief priests and Sanhedrin council to go to Damascus to arrest Jews there who were following Jesus
5. On the Road to Damascus, this happened:

Acts 9:3-6 suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you

persecute me?" ⁵ *"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.* ⁶ *"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."*

6. The post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to this enemy of the church was the final one Jesus ever made; his answer to Saul's trembling question, "Who are you Lord?" changed Saul's personal history and the history of the world: "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting."
7. Saul's mission began that very day: "Get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do!"

B. Paul Ascribes His Salvation Directly to the Grace of God

1 Corinthians 15:9-10 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. ¹⁰ 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.

1. God's grace in Christ covered all of Paul's many sins
2. God's grace in Christ was powerfully effective in changing his heart
3. God's grace in Christ commissioned him to be an apostle
4. God's grace in Christ gave him relentless energy in preaching this gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike
 - a. Paul worked harder than anyone
 - b. But he knew every ounce of energy came ultimately from God

I've often thought of these expressions of Paul's work ethic:

2 Corinthians 6:5 hard work, sleepless nights and hunger

Acts 17:17 Paul reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

Acts 20:34-35 You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Three-legged stool of daily ministry:

Daytime: reasoning in the marketplace with Gentiles

Evening: training the new disciples in Christian doctrine

Late at Night: Making tents to supply his own needs and those of his companions

Then... on the sabbath: debating with hostile Jews in the synagogue

C. Paul's Commitment to this Unchanging Message

1 Corinthians 15:11 Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

V. Applications

A. Come to Christ!

B. Rejoice in the Resurrection of Christ from the Dead

1. Give a clear display of hope in the face of the grace
2. In this age of COVID-19, show people that death holds no ultimate fear for you; that Christ's resurrection has given you eternal life and a sure hope of heaven
3. Thank God daily for this joy, this freedom from fear of death

C. Evangelize: Speak often to lost people about this hope you have

1. Learn the key texts in the Old Testament I have used today
2. Psalm 22; Psalm 16; Psalm 110; Isaiah 53; Daniel 7
3. Learn the basic apologetic arguments for the historical proofs of the resurrection

- 4. Trade with your one talent... don't hide it in the ground!
- D. At Christian Funerals: Don't Grieve Like Lost People Who Have No Hope
- E. Prepare to Die Well as a Christian, Filled with HOPE!
- F. Final Application:

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain