

I Deliver What Is Of First Importance

1 Corinthians 15:1-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you were to be asked, what is of first importance in your life, how would you respond? Your spouse? Your children? Your home? Your retirement savings? The upcoming election?

I am hoping that you would say that what is of first importance in your life is your God, your faith in Christ, the fact that you are a Christian.

By the time we get to our text in the fifteenth chapter, Paul has addressed numerous issues in his letter to the fledgling church in Corinth. He had spoken about the factions that had arisen in their congregation. He has addressed: sexual immorality, marriage, celibacy, divorce and remarriage; Christian liberty; their attitude about the Lord's Supper, and table fellowship at that meal; eating of meat sacrificed to idols; the gifts of the Holy Spirit; public worship; and a number of other things.

Paul's addresses concerns for the whole Christian life? It has led lead some to believe that how you live your life as a Christian is of first importance, claiming our works matter in our relationship to God.

Some Christian teachers encourage people to take comfort in the fact that they are basically good people. In fact, some so-called Christian preachers spend an enormous amount of time extolling people to think that there is nothing wrong with them. They try to pep-talk them into happier lives. Some even go so far as to explain away sin as if it were nothing, or as if people could, of their own free will, stop sinning.

One popular Bible teacher from television was recently heard to say this. *I'm going to tell you something, folks, I didn't stop sinning until I finally got it through my thick head I wasn't a sinner anymore. And the religious world thinks that's heresy and they want to hang you for it.... All I was ever taught to say was "I, a poor, miserable sinner." I am not poor, I am not miserable and I am not a sinner. That is a lie from the pit of hell. That is what I were, and if I still was, then Jesus died in vain.* (From the Cross to the Throne audio tape, Joyce Meyer, Life Christian Center, Saint Louis, Mo.)

Oh really? When asked about this statement, this popular speaker tried to explain it away. *I know that I sin all the time and when I say that I'm not a sinner I don't mean that I don't sin. I just mean that I'm not going to go around all the time identifying myself as a sinner because that gives me the mentality then that that's all I am....if we continually think of ourselves as just poor miserable sinners we never overcome that sinful lifestyle.* (Issues, Etc., KFUE AM, May 23, 2005)

If we look back at our Gospel lesson, does this contemporary preacher sound more like the Pharisee or the tax collector? The Pharisee and our preacher may not be perfect, but they are not as bad as the tax collector, they claim they are not sinners. But which one was it that Jesus said

went home justified? Which went home right with God? The one who declared, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Dearly beloved of God, if you and I were not sinners, would Christ have given His life unto death on the cross? What is more, if we think of ourselves as better than poor, miserable, sinners, does His death have the same sweetness and comfort for us? Those who understand themselves as sinners take comfort not in themselves, but in the love, mercy, and grace of God. Sinners see themselves as loved beyond reason, freely forgiven by God and made holy in the blood of the Lamb.

We could talk about our Christian life walk, but let’s walk with Paul as he gets to this fifteenth chapter of Corinthians, he says this: *Now 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— unless you believed in vain.*

What is it that you and I, as faithful Christians, received? In what do we stand, by which we are saved? The Gospel! What exactly is the Gospel? Paul continues to explain, *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, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time.*

What is of first importance to Christians is that Christ died for our sins and rose again on the third day. What is of first importance is that Jesus has taken our sinfulness into Himself, and given to us the hope of His resurrection.

As Christians, what is of first importance is not that we look to ourselves, but to Christ. It is just as Paul declares in the tenth verse of our text, *by the grace of God I am what I am.*

Am I a sinner? Yes! I am chief of sinners. Am I a redeemed and holy child of God? Yes! I am completely and totally forgiven. I am holy and blameless before God because of the work of Christ.

When I begin to think that I am not a sinner, I may also begin to believe that I really don’t need what Christ purchased upon the cross. When I begin to think that I am not a sinner, then I may begin to think that I am OK, just as I am. When I begin to think that I am not a sinner, I may see no need to gather with others to receive the blessings that are delivered to me in Word and Sacrament, the blessings purchased by Christ’s innocent suffering and death upon the cross.

That TV preacher is absolutely right, as long as I think myself a sinner - *I* - Todd Randall Jerabek can never overcome my sinful lifestyle. And dear friends, that is exactly the point, I cannot overcome my sinful lifestyle. But, Christ has overcome my sinfulness for me. He purchased my forgiveness and gives me the strength to live a new life.

If however I believe I am no longer a sinner, I begin to delude myself into thinking that I *have* nothing to overcome. In doing so, I make myself my own Savior. If I believe myself not to be a

sinner, I may end up like the Pharisee in our Gospel, thinking everybody else is a vile sinner and I am saved by my own life. Or, I might examine God's Word, and become depressed, wondering how I will save myself from the sinful mess I have gotten myself into.

That is the question Paul wrestles with. He even writes about it in His letter to the Romans. *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.* (Rom. 7:15-20 ESV) In other words, Paul admits he is a what? A sinner, a poor, miserable, sinner!

And Paul continues, *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.* (Rom. 7:24-25 ESV) Paul understands that he is a sinner. According to his flesh, he can do no good thing in accordance to God's will. By the Spirit, he knows what to do, but he fails to do it. Christians are constantly struggling against their flesh, to do what they know is right according to God's law. And even knowing what to do, they continue to fall into sin. Why? Because we are all still sinners.

So, what is it that is of first importance to sinners? *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.*

Notice how close these words are to the words of our creeds? Not by accident has similar content been incorporated into the confession of our faith - it is of first importance. It is where the hope and joy of the Christian is to be found. Our hope is not found in denying that we are sinners, but in believing and embracing the work of Christ for forgiveness and life.

Dearly beloved of God, I could deliver something new to you today, I could give you wishful thinking, expounding upon the fact that neither you and I are sinners. Yes, we sin occasionally, but we get over it and God is happy with us as we are. Just as God explained to Jeremiah a couple weeks ago, I could say such things, but they would be visions of my own mind, they might be very nice words from me, but they would not be a faithful Word from God. I could give you a wonderful speech that may make you feel really good about the person you are and how good you are doing. I might even be able to deliver an incredibly powerful sermon, and you might leave here feeling really good about how you have been living your life, and with the best motivation to go and do more of the same.

I'm not going to do that.

Instead of preaching from my heart or my head, I deliver to you what is of first importance, that Christ died for your sin, that He was raised again on the third day for your justification. It is into this death that you have been baptized, that as Christ has risen from the dead, you too may live a new life. And this not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, by faith in Christ Jesus. In Christ, you are

the beloved, redeemed, and holy children of God. That is, you are Christians.

I delivered to you earlier what is of first importance, that although you are a poor, miserable sinner, you are forgiven. Christ died and rose again and commanded that this be proclaimed into your ears - that by these words, your sins are forgiven before your Father in heaven. He has loved you with incredible love.

In a moment, I will deliver to you what is of first importance, take eat, the body of Christ; take drink the true blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Christ gives Himself for you and to you, filling you with Himself and making you a new creature in Him. You are His holy dwelling place because He has made you such.

You are thinking, "Pastor, this is nothing new!"

You are right, there is nothing new here today, but it is of first importance. Paul didn't do anything new either, he simply delivered what is of first importance, and did it again and again and again.

It is of first importance because it makes saints out of sinners. It is of first importance, for it delivers Christ's work of redemption upon the cross to you, and prepares you for your eternal home in heaven. It gives to you the confidence that as Christ rose from the dead, by the glory of the Father, you too will rise on the last day. On that day we will no longer be sinner/saints, sinners according to our sinful flesh and saints by grace through faith in the work of Christ.

On that last day, our bodies will be raised without sin, and we will live new lives as the redeemed saints we have been by faith. Then we will be able to say that we are no longer sinners. Until that day, we rejoice in who we are in Christ Jesus. Amen.