

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "The Essence of the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 15:1-11)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 4/8/2012

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If you are able to do so as you are listening today, I hope that you will take up your copy of God's Word and read along with me. The passage I want to call to your attention is found in the book of First Corinthians, in chapter fifteen, beginning at verse one. The Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit writes these words – First Corinthians chapter fifteen, beginning at verse one:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the Gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you — unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.

After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.

Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy 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 toward me was not in vain; but I

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labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

The theme on which I want to speak to you today is the theme we find here in First Corinthians chapter fifteen: the essence of the Gospel. The essence of the one true Gospel that must be preached by the church, that must be believed by individuals, in order for souls to be saved from eternal damnation in Hell.

### **Many False Gospels**

Now, in contrast to what we have just read, there are many false gospels today.

There is *the social gospel* – the idea that improving man's social, physical, or moral condition in this life will lead to blessedness in the next life.

There is *the works gospel* – I'm doing the best I can, I live by the Sermon on the Mount, and that will get me to Heaven.

There is *the sacramental gospel* – the false doctrine that baptism, or the mass, or the communion table can save us.

There is *the humanistic gospel* – the false gospel which says that man is his own god, that this life is all there is, that we just need to make the best of it, and it doesn't really matter whether we choose to spend our time in hedonistic pleasures or in a frantic striving for human achievement.

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There is *the syncretistic gospel* – The false gospel that says that all roads, all religions, lead to God.

And there is *the universalistic gospel* – The false teaching that all will be saved, somehow, because a loving God would never condemn anyone to Hell.

All those gospels are false gospels. And it is easy to fall under the deception of false gospels. It can happen quickly. The Apostle Paul writes to the Galatian church and says this:

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:6-9)

In other words, let him be condemned to Hell. Those are strong words. But they are vital words. We need to understand the one true Gospel. We need to understand it thoroughly. We need to understand it intimately. We need to believe it unreservedly.

And, we need to guard the Gospel. For the sake of our own souls. For the sake of our families and loved ones. For the sake of those to whom we would bear witness. Do we know the truth of the Gospel ourselves? Are we holding onto it? And are we

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telling the truth to others when we talk to them about the Gospel? We need to understand the essence of the Gospel.

### **What Is the Essence of the Gospel?**

What is the essence of the Gospel? We have it here in First Corinthians chapter 15, verses 3-6:

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received:

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.

That is the essence of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit builds the case for us. He builds one thing upon another. Let us see how he does it.

### **The Essence of the Gospel is *Jesus Christ***

We see, first of all, that the essence of the Gospel is Jesus Christ. Paul begins by saying this, verse 3:

“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ” – let’s stop right there. Christ is the central focus of the Gospel. There is no Gospel without Jesus Christ. Who is Jesus Christ?

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He is the pre-existent God. John chapter 1, verses 1 and 2 – “In the beginning was the Word,” – Jesus Christ – “and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”

Colossians 1:17 – “He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.”

1 Timothy 1:17 – He is “the King, immortal, invisible, God alone who is wise.”

Jesus Christ is the pre-existent God, and He is also the Creator God. John chapter 1, verse 3 – “All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.”

Colossians 1:16 - "For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him."

Jesus Christ is the Creator God. Jesus Christ is also God the Son. His sonship has to do not with creation, but with His relationship to God the Father. Jesus is not, as some false religions teach, a lesser deity who was created at a later time. He is the eternal God. He is one with the Father from all eternity.

And God the Son, Philippians chapter two tells us, came into this world, cloaking His glory, taking on the form of a servant. God the Son was obedient to the Father in all things. Jesus said repeatedly during His earthy ministry, “I do not seek My own will, but the will of the Father who sent Me.” And as Jesus comes to the end of His earthly ministry in John 17, He prays, “Father, I have glorified You on the earth. I

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have finished the work that You gave me to do." And as He faces the cross, He says, "Father, not My will, but Thy will, be done."

God the Son was obedient to the Father even to the point of dying on a cross for our sins. And that is what Paul is proclaiming here in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Jesus Christ is the central focus of the Gospel.

### **The Essence of the Gospel is That *Christ Died***

We see, secondly, that the essence of the Gospel is that *Christ died*. "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died" –

This was not an accidental death, not an unplanned death. Peter in the book of Acts preaches that Jesus was delivered into the hands of the Jews and crucified "by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). It was no accident. It was planned from all eternity.

Ephesians chapter one tells us that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit entered into a great covenant of redemption in eternity past. God the Father chose a people for Himself out of the mass of lost humanity. God the Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. God the Son agreed to come into the world and to purchase their salvation with His own blood on the cross. And God the Holy Spirit agreed to apply that salvation by causing individuals to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. And God the Holy Spirit agreed to live in them as the seal or the down-payment of our ultimate redemption from sin and death.

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The greatest fact in the entire universe is that God came and died in our place. God came and did what we could not do for ourselves. So great is His love for us that God was willing to come into this world in a body of flesh and die for us. The essence of the Gospel is that Christ died.

### **The Essence of the Gospel is That *Christ Died for Our Sins***

But there is more. "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that *Christ died for our sins*"

The fact is that if there had been only one human being, and only one sin, God could have done no less than to die on behalf of that one human being. The very first sin brought a curse upon mankind, and upon the entire creation.

The Bible tells us that the sin of one man, Adam, plunged the entire human race into sin and death. Romans five tells us that by one man's offense, by Adam's offense, we all died. When our first parents sinned, they became sinners by nature. And we, as their descendants, share in that sin nature.

We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. Psalm 51 tells us that even a little baby in the womb, not yet born, has that sin nature which the child has inherited from Adam. And it doesn't take long for even a little newborn child to exhibit the fact that he is a sinner by nature.

And our sins are *our* sins – we are personally and individually responsible before God. But Christ died – *for our sins*.

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He fulfilled the Law perfectly in His life and death so that God could by His infinite grace credit that perfect law-keeping righteousness to our account, and mark our sin-debt, "paid in full." The essence of the Gospel is that Christ died for our sins.

### **The Essence of the Gospel is That *Jesus Christ was Buried***

And not only that, the essence of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ *was buried*. "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins, and that He was buried" –

Jesus Christ went into the grave as we go into the grave. His body was wrapped in grave clothes, and sealed in a tomb. The essence of the Gospel is that Christ died for our sins, and He was buried. But that is not the end of the history of Jesus Christ.

### **The Essence of the Gospel is that Christ Rose Again**

The essence of the Gospel is also that *Jesus Christ rose from the dead*. "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day" –

He did not see corruption. The grave could not hold him. He came out of the tomb, and left behind the shell of the grave clothes, intact.

Why did Jesus rise from the dead? He was, Romans tells us, raised for our justification. And Paul tells us earlier in First Corinthians that "God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power" (6:14). Christ secured victory over death for us. We go into the grave, we see corruption. But we shall be raised

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incorruptible, as we read later in this chapter, First Corinthians fifteen. This is the great future hope of the believer, the day of our resurrection. Christ rose from the dead. He is the firstfruits; He is the forerunner, of our own resurrection from the dead. But there is more.

### **The Essence of the Gospel is That *Jesus Christ Was Seen***

The essence of the Gospel is that *Jesus Christ was seen*. "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day, *and that He was seen*" –

Some false teachers try to say that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was merely a spiritual resurrection or a symbolic resurrection, not a real, literal resurrection. But that is not what the Bible teaches. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a physical, bodily resurrection. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most well-attested events of human history.

We have the proof of a great number of witnesses who saw Him during the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension. Paul names them here – as many as 500 people at one time.

### **The Essence of the Gospel is That *It Is According to the Scriptures***

So Paul builds this wonderful, magnificent case for the Gospel: "Christ died for our sins" – "He was buried" – "He rose again the third day" – "He was seen" –

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But thus far, we have left out one vital thing. And this is our last point about the essence of the Gospel. It is a repeated phrase in verses 3 and 4: "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins *according to the Scriptures*, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day *according to the Scriptures*." The Gospel message is "according to the Scriptures."

What Scriptures? At that time, it was the Old Testament and perhaps a few parts of the New Testament. For us today, it is the entire canon of Scripture, the sixty-six books of the Bible.

If we are going to be a true church, if we are going to be a Gospel-preaching church, we have no choice but to be a Scripture-driven church, because the Gospel we preach is "according to the Scriptures." It is the Gospel that is set forth in this one and only supernatural Book. And you won't find it anywhere else.

### **Only Two Responses to the Gospel**

According to Scripture, there will be two and only two responses to the Gospel.

Some will believe the Scriptures – as Paul says here in verse eleven to the Corinthians, "so we preached and so you believed." Saving faith means believing the Gospel as it is presented in the Scriptures.

But many will not believe the Scriptures. In Luke 16, we read the account of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man died as an unbeliever and went into Hell. Lazarus died as a believer and went into Paradise. And the rich man asked that

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Lazarus be sent back from the dead, to bear witness to his five unsaved brothers, so that they would not come into this place of torment where the rich man was. He said, "If one goes to them from the dead, they will repent" But the answer comes to him: "They have Moses and the prophets" – they have the Scriptures – "let them hear them...If they do not hear Moses and the prophets" – if they are not willing to believe the Scriptures – then "neither will they be persuaded even if someone should go back to them from the dead." Such is the heart of unbelief, apart from the working of the Spirit of God to regenerate the soul who is dead in trespasses and sins.

If you believe the Scriptures, you will believe the Gospel. If you believe the Gospel, you will believe the Scriptures. The two things are inseparable.

It is the preaching of the Gospel message, from the Scriptures, which brings salvation. Paul says to the Corinthians, this is "the Gospel which I preached to you." He says, this is the Gospel "which also you received." He says, this is the Gospel "in which you stand." He says, this is the Gospel "by which you are saved." He says, this is the Gospel "according to the Scriptures."

There is nothing more important for us as individuals than to understand and believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is for this life. It is the basis for the life we now live as believers. And the Gospel is for the life to come. It is the basis of our hope for eternity. Believing the Gospel is the difference between Heaven and Hell.

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And there is nothing more important for God's people as a church, than to proclaim this Gospel to the world – accurately, clearly, and completely.

We cannot preach redemption without preaching about the Curse.

We cannot preach about grace without preaching about the Law.

We cannot preach salvation without preaching about sin.

We cannot preach Christ without preaching about the cross.

We cannot preach about Heaven without preaching about Hell.

We cannot preach eternal life without preaching about a bodily, literal resurrection.

We cannot tell people what God can do for them, unless we can tell them what God in Christ has done for us.

The Gospel is "according to the Scriptures." But it is not merely words on a page. It is the life experience of every true believer. We declare to others what we have received and experienced for ourselves.

There is nothing more important for us to do than to proclaim this true Gospel, and no other Gospel, as we have seen in Galatians chapter one.

And as we proclaim the Gospel, we rely on the Holy Spirit of God for the results. We cannot make people come to Christ. We cannot force people or manipulate people into the kingdom of God. That will not produce true conversion.

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The job of the church is to preach the message, and then to remember that God the Holy Spirit is sovereign in salvation. He saves whom He chooses, when He chooses, and in the circumstances He chooses. We must trust Him to do His work.

But God the Holy Spirit always saves men and women and boys and girls, and only saves them, by the Gospel – “there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He is the One. That, dear friend, is the essence of the Gospel.

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