

“Of First Importance”

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

Pastor Ben Froese, Jan. 1, 2023

³ 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, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ 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. 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.

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. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

I. The Desire for Change in the New Year

According to a recent survey, Canadians set an average of 1.7 resolutions each year, and 62% of people find the practice of setting new year’s resolutions to be beneficial.

With a new year seemingly comes a “clean slate” to start afresh and be different than we used to be, and many of us enjoy setting some goals about what we want to change in our lives.

According to another recent survey, for 2023, the five most common resolutions include “improve fitness,” “lose weight,” “improve diet,” “improve mental health,” and “improve finances.”

II. The Desire for Change Among God’s People

As the Apostle Paul writes the book of 1 Corinthians, the book that our Scripture passage is taken from this morning, he is also concerned about change. As a matter of fact, he deeply wants to see some changes happen among the people he is writing to.

And through this letter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we discover that *God’s* desire is that *His people* would be open to change. The church at Corinth, yes, and us today as well.

Some think we change simply by trying harder.

Perhaps this is what's going on in the book of Galatians, where Paul writes, "After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3).

III. Paul's Life Change and Ours

"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" (1 Cor 15:9-10).

In Paul's story, it's the grace of God that transforms him from a violent man who persecuted Christians to being perhaps the most influential Christian missionary who has ever lived. And no doubt, his story is a dramatic one, as he encounters the risen Jesus in a vision as he's on the road to Damascus.

But Paul stresses here that it wasn't a vision per se that changed him, but God's grace that changed him.

Grace is what changes us. But what about effort? The philosopher and writer Dallas Willard once wrote, "Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action."

IV. Of First Importance

This is the map of God's grace, this is the message that has the power to change us, and this is the thing that is of first importance:

"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" (1 Cor 15:3-4).

Paul doesn't give us a magical formula or a new principle to apply to our lives. Of first importance, he says, actually doesn't have to do with what we do.

It's not "*that you* do this or that."

It's "*that Christ*."

That Christ has done something that changes everything.

Christ died for our sins... he was buried... and, yes, he was raised again. That, in a nutshell, is the gospel message. And this changes everything.

It changes the world. And this gospel message is what changes our lives as well. It is because of this message that God's grace flows toward us. God's grace that saves us and that transforms us as well.

V. The Gospel Changes Everything

“The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is inaccurate to think the gospel is what saves non-Christians, and then Christians mature by trying harder to live according to biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our minds, hearts, and lives by believing the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on” (Tim Keller, *Center Church*).

Life Group Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Do you have any New Year’s resolutions? What are they? Do you find this practice of making New Year’s resolutions helpful?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-11

2. What first strikes you in this passage?
3. What are some of the things that we might be tempted to put as “of first importance” in our lives? Why do you think Paul reminds his audience here about what is truly “of first importance”? Why might we need to hear this today?
4. How has the gospel changed your life? What might it look like for you to allow the gospel to continue to change you?
5. Reflect on the Tim Keller quote above (under section V). What do you think about this?

Pray for each other as we enter 2023! Pray for specific requests for the new year from those in your group.