

Abounding in the Work of the Lord

Scripture Text: 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Introduction

We have been looking at the letter of First Corinthians for the past couple of months. Today's message will be the last in this series before we begin the season of Advent, the time of preparation and celebration of Christmas. Throughout the letter of First Corinthians we have learned various things about what the church is and what the church should be doing *and* not doing. Paul wrote the letter of First Corinthians to the church in Corinth, a city in ancient Greece that had a reputation for immorality, religious diversity, and corruption. The church struggled under these worldly influences and began to divide over various issues not long after Paul planted the church there. Paul took the opportunity to write this letter to the church to address several issues that were causing trouble in the Corinthian congregation. I would like to briefly summarize what we have read thus far in this letter before we look at today's text.

In chapter one, Paul described several callings of the church from which we were able to define the word "church": *The church is a group of people whom God has called out of the world into fellowship with Jesus Christ to be His holy and distinct people in order to bring glory to God.* In chapters two and three, Paul wrote that the church ought to consist of spiritually mature people who are not divided by following different leaders in the church, but who are unified in following Jesus Christ. Paul also mentioned that the church is the Temple of God and has God's Spirit dwelling in it. In chapter four, Paul reminded us that we are servants and stewards of God who ought to be teaching others to become mature disciples of Jesus Christ. In chapter five through seven, Paul addressed the issue of sexual immorality and how that defiles the church and, therefore, it should be addressed. He also mentioned about conflict in the church and how the church ought to deal with it internally rather than taking our issues to the unbelieving world.

In chapters eight through ten, Paul dealt with the issue of food sacrificed to idols and how even though certain things might be permissible for us to do, not all things are beneficial for the church. This is particularly true if a member's freedom to do something causes another to stumble or lose faith. In chapter ten Paul reminded the church that everything we do ought to be done to bring glory to God and in chapter eleven, we read about celebrating the Lord's Supper and the significance of that important ordinance of the church. We learned how the Lord's Supper symbolized the sacrifice Jesus made for us and how we ought to observe it carefully and regularly. In chapters twelve through fourteen, Paul addressed the use and misuse of spiritual gifts, those things which God has gifted each member of the Body of Christ, the church, in order to accomplish the mission of the church. These gifts ought to be used for the common good of the church, to build up and help the church. In the middle of this exhortation on spiritual gifts, Paul explained that everything ought to be done in love, for without love we are nothing and the good we do is worthless.

We are now toward the end of this letter, where Paul addressed a *significant event* in the life of the church. It is in many respects the most important event in all of human history with huge implications for the church. For many Christians, and non-Christians, the season of Christmas is their favorite time of the year. For many, Christmas is the most important event in the life of the church. With the Christmas season upon us, most of us are eagerly anticipating what Andy Williams called “*The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*.” While the birth of Christ is certainly important, the event most celebrated and discussed in Scripture is not the birth of our Savior but rather the death and the resurrection of our Savior. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ that Paul addressed in chapter fifteen of this letter and to which we will turn our attention for the remainder of this sermon.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Paul began chapter fifteen by reminding the Corinthian church of the gospel, the good news. Paul said he preached the good news of Jesus Christ, how Christ died for our sins, was buried, and then arose on the third day. All of this was in accordance with Scripture. God had revealed the nature of the gospel, His plan for redeeming mankind, through the prophets hundreds of years before Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. It was not the birth of Christ or His death that Paul spent much time writing, but about Jesus’ miraculous resurrection and what that meant for the church. Apparently some members in the church of Corinth were denying the resurrection of the dead. Paul responded as follows:

1 Corinthians 15:12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

Therefore, Paul defended the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the resurrection of His people – the church. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, so will we. Jesus’ resurrection means several things for us. I would like to point out just a few things from the passage that the resurrection means for the church:

- The Resurrection Gives Hope
- The Resurrection Means Victory
- The Resurrection Motivates Us for Mission

The Resurrection Gives Hope

What is the hope Christians have and what does that mean for the church? In other words, what is the one thing that gives you hope no matter what the world becomes, no matter what happens in your life? Certainly, our faith gives us hope and motivates us to persevere, to keep on living. Our faith gives us hope to look forward to the future, even when that future may seem bleak and uncertain. The Christian hope is based upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ resurrection and that of His people are connected on account of their union with Him. Earlier in chapter fifteen, Paul connected the resurrection of Jesus to our future hope.

1 Corinthians 15:13-19 ...if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and *your faith is in vain*...And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and *you are still in your sins*. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

There are several things these verses say about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus had not been raised, if He is still dead in the tomb, then our faith is in vain, meaning it has no purpose. Not only would our faith be in vain, but we would still be in our sins. Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ, there would be no forgiveness of sins. We would still be guilty of our sins. Lastly, if Jesus had not been raised from the dead, if the resurrection never happened, then there would be no hope of us being raised from the dead. If there is no resurrection, then let us enjoy this life while we can for this is the only life we will have. Our Christian faith, however, is based upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul explained the mystery of the resurrection. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. We must be changed. These sinful, mortal bodies must be resurrected to immortal bodies. Some of the Corinthians might have thought the bodily resurrection was foolish. They expressed skepticism about the resurrection. Paul used an example from nature to show that such transformation already takes place within creation. Paul explained that a seed dies and then grows into a plant. Likewise, we must die in order to be raised to new life. There will be a day when Jesus Christ returns and those who have placed their trust in Him, will be raised to new life, just like God the Father raised Jesus on the third day. Because of the resurrection, there is hope.

The Resurrection Means Victory

The resurrection of Jesus Christ also means victory. Just like the hymn, there is *Victory in Jesus*. Because of the Fall of Man through the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, all mankind is now infected with the disease of sin. All of us are born into a condition of being separated from God and face eternal punishment for our sin. God cannot tolerate sin and the result of sin is death.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Scripture declares that death results from sin. Disease, decay, violence, and other means may cause death, but these *secondary causes* would not exist or have power without sin as their source. Sin enslaves. Sin kills. Jesus Christ liberates. Jesus Christ gives life. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is hope. There is hope that our sins are forgiven. There is hope that we are reconciled to God. There is hope that we have received the grace of a loving and merciful God. The resurrection is essential to the gospel that saves believers from their sin. If there was no resurrection, then sin is not defeated. Not only does the resurrection give hope, but it means victory. Jesus reversed the condition of death that was

a result of sin and granted to people the immortality God created them to enjoy. The high point of this passage are actually quotes from the prophets Isaiah and Hosea:

1 Corinthians 15:54-55 Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

This is one of my favorite statements in Scripture and the reason I love the song *Christ is Risen*. Death is swallowed up in victory. It has been defeated. These statements are almost like taunts to death. Paul was taunting death by asking these questions, “Where is your victory? Huh? Where is your sting?” Although our resurrection has yet to occur, Paul’s confident hope in Jesus Christ to bring about the resurrection of us all removed all fear of death. Because Jesus’ resurrection had indeed taken place, Paul saw death in the process of being defeated. While it hasn’t happened yet, we can claim victory.

Paul’s point is that because believers’ resurrected bodies will be immortal and imperishable, death will never affect them. Death will not be able to destroy us or to plague us. Instead, we will live eternally, free from the worry of physical deterioration and death. The victory comes through Jesus Christ not because he died, but *because he was raised from the dead*. Because believers are united to Christ, they must be resurrected like Him. The first Adam disobeyed God, sinned, and therefore brought sin and death upon us all. Christ, through the resurrection, became a life-giving spirit. Death is destroyed. We have victory!

The Resurrection Motivates Us for Mission

Because the resurrection is sure and our hope is not in vain, we can claim victory. Jesus Christ has won. As a result, we should be firm in our faith and always be about the mission of the church. Because there is victory and our resurrection is assured, Paul ended the chapter with the following statement:

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

This is the practical application for the resurrection. Because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and because we, too, will join Him when we are raised, we should be steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord. Paul exhorted the Corinthians to hold firmly to the word he had preached to them, to guard their belief in the gospel and in the resurrection of all believers. Paul exhorted the church to let nothing move them because those who denied the resurrection undermined the gospel itself. When Satan attacks you, or life throws you a curve ball, stand firm in your faith knowing that the battle has already been won. No matter how persuasive the world may be, no matter what “evidence” the world may present, we should remember the truth of Jesus’ resurrection, our union with Him, and our future resurrection and eternal life with God. Victory is assured. We have hope.

The glorious victory over death and the assurance of the resurrection also provides every encouragement for us to serve Jesus Christ fully. Some question what is the “work” Paul exhorted the church to always abound? Some see this as the financial support he mentioned in the following chapter. Certainly we should financially support the ministry with our tithes and offerings. We should give of our time, talents and treasures. But I am persuaded that Paul is referring to the overall work of the church – the gospel of Jesus Christ. Recall that the Corinthian church was the result of Paul’s “work in the Lord.” He preached the gospel to them and God rewarded that work by growing the congregation.

This, of course, does not mean there will not be problems. Paul wrote this letter to address problems that had crept into the church. The work of the Lord is ongoing, and therefore, the congregation is exhorted to be steadfast and immovable. They were to give themselves fully to the work of the Lord, in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, sharing what God had done for them and making more disciples. Yes, there would be problems as the Corinthian church experienced, but they should do it knowing that their labor in the Lord is not in vain. The work of the church that is done in faith and based upon the gospel of Jesus Christ will bring lasting results. We have the following promise from the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 55:11 ...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Nothing done in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ will be in vain. We may not see the results immediately. We may not even see the results in our lifetime, but we can be assured that our work in the Lord will not be in vain. We must live with an *eternal perspective*. The success of the church’s mission is assured. Paul told us to abound in the work of the Lord, *knowing* that in the Lord our labor will produce results.

Conclusion

In closing, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians should be a reminder to us of who the church is and what it should be doing. We are God’s holy people called into fellowship with Jesus Christ with a mission to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. The world is lost, separated from Him by sin. The result is death; but there is good news. There is hope and there is victory. Because of the glorious resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness of sin. We can be reconciled to God. We can also be assured that just as Jesus was raised from the dead, we too will one day be raised to new life. This is good news, and the world desperately needs to hear it. That is our work!

The church needs to be working while there is time – working to “preach the word” to the world, to share the good news to those around us. We can be assured that the work God has called us to do will not be in vain. As long as we remain faithful to the One Who called us into fellowship with Him, and the One Who commissioned us to make disciples of all nations, He will bless our labor. Therefore, let us be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, and be assured that our work is not in vain. May it be so. Amen!