

"The Most Righteous Person Who Ever Lived"

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin this morning by asking you a question. Who is the most righteous person who ever lived? I'll give you a hint in answering it. That person is here in our sanctuary. It may be the person sitting right next to you in fact. Turn in your Bibles to the passage I read, 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, and I'll explain why I say that.

THE SUBSTITUTIONARY DEATH OF JESUS

Let's start with verse 1 and the word "gospel." The Greek word translated "gospel" connotes "good news" about Jesus. That good news consists of who He is and what He did, is doing, and will do. In the passage I read, Paul focuses on two of the things that He did.

The first is found in verse 3. He died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that is, as the Old Testament prophesied that He would. Notice the phrase "for our sins." That phrase reveals the unique character of Jesus' death. It was substitutionary. That simply means that Jesus stood in for us on the cross. He took into Himself all of our sins and paid the penalty for them that we should have paid.

To help you grasp the staggering implications of that, think of it in these terms. It is estimated that there are six and a half billion people on earth. Stop and think about the worst sin that each of those people, including you and I, have committed. That's 6,500,000,000 worst sins. Jesus took each and every one of those into Himself on the cross and paid the penalty for them that we should have paid. That's in addition to all the sins of every person who has lived and will live.

So that's one thing that Jesus did that Paul mentions in this passage. He died for our sins.

THE HISTORICAL RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Paul mentions a second thing in verse 4. Jesus *"was raised on the*

third day according to the Scriptures."

Look at the opening words of verse 4. Jesus was buried. Paul is telling us here that He was really and truly dead. We talk about corpses or cadavers and that's exactly what Jesus was from 3:00 Friday to sunrise on Sunday – a corpse or cadaver. His body began to decay just like everyone else's who has ever died.

But something happened on the third day. As Romans 8:11 says it, the Holy Spirit raised Him from the dead. That was an historical resurrection. You can see that in verses 5-9. Paul recounts here all the persons, over 500 of them, who witnessed Jesus alive after He died. His point is that in time and space, in history, Jesus rose from the dead.

Many deny that though. Scholar and Jesus seminar leader Marcus Borg, for instance, said this: *"As a child, I took it for granted that Easter meant that Jesus literally rose from the dead. I now see Easter very differently. For me, it is irrelevant where or not the tomb was empty. Whether Easter involved something remarkable happening to the physical body of Jesus is irrelevant."* He then went to on deny that Jesus rose from the dead.

It's ironic that Borg was actually smarter as a child than he is as an adult – when it comes to the gospel at least. I say that because Jesus did rise from the dead. Something remarkable happened to His body on the third day. As John Updike explains it, the Holy Spirit reversed the dissolution of its cells, reknit it molecules, and rekindled its amino acids. The result was that Jesus was just as really and truly alive on Sunday as He was dead on Friday and Saturday.

You realize what that means of course. Jesus is alive and well today as I speak. He's a living Savior and Lord not a dead one.

Those then are the two things that Jesus did and that Paul mentions. He died for our sins and then rose from the dead on the third day.

Now, in verse 3, Paul says about those two things that they're *"of first importance."* The death and resurrection of Jesus, in other words, are the two most significant events in human history. They impact

humanity far more profoundly than any other events ever have.

Their impact, according to verse 2, is that they save us. The Bible uses that word and its noun form, salvation, all the time. That is the spectacular result of Jesus' death and resurrection – salvation.

I use the word "spectacular" because of what salvation means to us. It means two things, both of which I want to explain to you.

RIGHTEOUSNESS IMPUTED TO US

The first thing that it means is that righteousness is imputed to us.

I have question for you that's the flipside of the first one I asked earlier. Who is the most evil person who ever lived?

People would likely give a variety of answers. Those answers might include the Roman Emperor Caligula, Attila the Hun, the Marquis de Sade, Adolph Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Osama ben Laden, or a host of others.

But none of those is the right answer. I know that because I can tell you categorically who the most evil person was. There isn't any doubt about it. It was Jesus. During His six hours on the cross, He was more evil than Caligula, Attila the Hun, the Marquis de Sade, Adolph Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and Osama ben Laden all put together. That's because, as I've already explained, He was their substitute and ours there. He took into Himself all of their sins and ours.

Here's what I want you to see. Because Jesus became the most evil person who ever lived, you or I who follow Him have become the most righteous person who ever lived. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "*He (God the Father) made Him who knew no sin (God the Son) to be sin in our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*" Notice what we become here – the righteousness of God in Jesus. That means we become the righteousness of Jesus Himself.

Romans 4:22,24 explains how that happens. Father God imputes this righteousness to us. That's the word that Paul uses there, "imputes." That means that He thinks and acts as if we're as righteous as Jesus is. He regards and treats us as persons who have always done what is good

and who have never once done what is bad. He views us and responds to us, in other words, as if we're sinless and perfect as Jesus is.

I remember a man growing up named Lester. Lester was a vile and despicable person. He was the town drunk who mistreated his wife and children and utterly disregarded the feelings and interests of others. But he went forward in a revival service and decided to follow Jesus. When he arose from the altar that night, that town drunk was, in Father God's eyes, sinless and perfect, just as Jesus is.

So that's the first thing that salvation means. Father God imputes the righteousness of Jesus to us. Which brings me back to my original question. Who is the most righteous person who ever lived? If you are following Jesus, the answer is "You are." If the person sitting next to you is following Jesus, the answer is "He or she is." In Father God's eyes, you and they are perfect and sinless just as Jesus is.

RIGHTEOUSNESS IMPARTED TO US

But salvation means a second thing. According to Philippians 1:11, Father God imparts righteousness to us. Imputed righteousness isn't about what we actually are. It's about how God views us. But imparted righteousness is about what we actually are. We actually are in our person and life righteous.

When I say righteous in this context, I obviously don't mean sinless and perfect as Jesus is. None of us in reality are that. What I do mean instead is right. We are right. For something to be right means that it's functioning properly, as it is intended to function.

Author Rebecca Pippert tells about taking a course at Harvard called *Systems of Counseling*. One day, the professor discussed a case study. In it, the therapist helped his patient uncover a hidden hostility toward his mother. Identifying the problem helped the patient. He felt as if a great load had been lifted off of his shoulders.

The professor was about to go to the next case study when Rebecca raised her hand. She asked him what the therapist would do if the

patient returned a few weeks later and said: *"I'm so relieved to understand what was bothering me . . . but now I'd like to get beyond my anger. I'd like to be able to love and forgive her. How do I do that?"* There were a few moments of silence after which the professor answered, *"I think the therapist would say, 'Lots of luck.'"*

In this real life case study, the mother wronged the son and he became angry with her. That anger then spilled over into other areas of his personality and life causing dysfunction and disruption there. But God didn't make him to function that way. He made him instead to love and forgive his mother and not get angry in the first place.

That helps us understand what it means to be righteous. It means that our person and life are right. They are functioning properly, as God made them to. The Bible does give us a detailed picture of such a person and life. We love and generously bless those who insult or humiliate us. We eagerly pull for the success of someone who is competing with us for favor, position, or financial gain. We care about the welfare of those who sue us. We don't desire or seek the praise of others for our good deeds. We receive the trials of life with patience, confidence, and joy. We're utterly at ease in the face of death. And so on. To be righteous means to be right. Our person and life are as they were made to be.

Our own culture calls what I'm talking about here "the power to live." That's what people today desperately seek, the power to live – and God gives us just that. Based on what Jesus did, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, He imparts righteousness to us. He makes our person and life right, as we ourselves desperately want and need them to be.

WHAT WE MUST DO TO BE SAVED

That then is what salvation means. Father God imputes and imparts righteousness to us. And because He does, we have the abundance of life and fullness of joy that Jesus promises we can have. We're set free.

But what must we do to be saved? That's the question and Paul answers it in verses 1 and 2. We must stand in and hold fast to the

gospel of Jesus. Those two actions "standing in" and "holding fast to" suggest making something fundamental. In this case that something is actually a someone, Jesus. We make Jesus fundamental. Or as most Christians say it, we make Him our Lord.

There's isn't anything abstract or vague about making Jesus our Lord. It means that we make and carry out the decision to learn and do all that He says. We learn what He says and then we do it – period.

Think of it in terms of "No, Lord." That phrase is an oxymoron. It's inherently contradictory. The moment we say "No" to Jesus, He's no longer our Lord. To make Him Lord means that we always say "Yes, Lord." Yes, I'll do or at least try the best I can to do what You say.

Take yielding our preferences and rights to others for instance. Jesus clearly teaches us to do that in many verses in the Bible. We want to do or have something a certain way but someone else wants to do or have it a different way. Jesus says that we should yield our preference and right to his or hers. Professing Christians probably disobey this teaching of His more than any other. They dislike doing it and so don't. They usually justify that with reasonable sounding objections like these. He doesn't expect me to be a doormat does He? He doesn't expect me to let people walk all over me does He? He doesn't expect me to always give in does He? Well, the answer to all of those questions is "Yes, He does." Jesus says that we should yield our preferences, opinions, and rights to others until doing so is destructive. The moment that we say "no" to that, He isn't our Lord. If He is our Lord, we'll say "yes" to it.

CONCLUSION

That illustrates the call of Easter. Jesus died and rose from the dead for us. The very least we can do for Him is to make Him our Lord, to make and carry out the decision to learn and do all that He says. If you haven't done that, I challenge you to today. An incredible thing will happen if you do. You will become the most righteous person who ever who ever lived.