

Sermon 56: 1 Corinthians 15:12-19: If the Resurrection Were Not True

OUTLINE

Implications for gospel preaching
Implications for personal salvation

INTRODUCTION

Every few years Ligonier ministries does a large state of theology survey where they ask the American population specific theological questions. The most shocking part of the survey is the answers that so called evangelical Christians give. To the question, 'Is everyone born innocent in the eyes of God?' 65% of self-identifying Evangelicals answered yes, denying the biblical doctrine of original sin.¹ The survey comments that this result is because of 'the influence of humanistic philosophies and worldviews that teach self-determinism and a view of humankind as basically good.' Too often our thinking is influenced by the prevalent philosophy of our age and not informed by the worldview of the Bible. Shocking results are seen in the other questions as well. Troubling beliefs by so called evangelicals over whether God accepts the worship of all other religions; whether gender is self-assigned or God assigned; whether the bible is true or full of myths etc. We can draw one of two conclusions, either those who say they evangelical are not; or there are many Christians who are in desperate need of being taught biblical truth and having the opinions of this age exchanged for the truth of God. It is possible as a Christian to be saved and hold to wrong views; ordinarily as we grow we realize the false views we hold and are happy to change them to agree with the teaching of God's word. As Christians we have the Spirit who is teaching us into the truth. I know for myself it took me a few years before I shook off the world's view of free will for a biblical view. I was a Christian while I held that wrong belief, but it was a belief that gave me a lot of trouble and blinded me to clear biblical truths. The test of whether someone is truly a believer is whether they are willing to submit themselves to the truth of God's word. The Corinthians were a lot like modern day evangelicals; they believed that Jesus was their Saviour, yet they also held to wrong ideas about the body and denied their own future bodily resurrection. V12 indicates to us that this was not the whole church, but a faction among them.

Paul has been talking about the resurrection of Christ, in order to establish a rationale for why we too will be resurrected in Him. Paul has placed the fact of Christ's resurrection beyond dispute as he has listed several witnesses to the Risen Lord. Some Corinthians were likely influenced by the dualistic anti-materialism of the day. Many saw the soul as good and the body as bad; the philosophically minded desired death to be free from the body in order to pursue the truth unhindered by the distractions of the flesh. Many would have drawn back in horror at the idea of having to be bodily resurrected. You will remember that Paul was preaching in the city of Athens in Acts 17, a philosophical hub where they loved to hear about new ideas. But when Paul mentioned the resurrection of the dead he was openly mocked, 17:32, 'Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."' What we are seeing here is the perennial problem of faith mixed with the unbiblical thinking of our age. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 is going to put on his lecturer and rhetorician's hat and show the terrible

¹ <https://thestateoftheology.com/> accessed 7/11/2025

implications of denying the possibility of a bodily resurrection. It has been noted that Paul is not talking like he would to false teachers, but there is definitely a strong and rebuking tone as he seeks to help these Corinthians to fix their theology.

As you look down at the text you will notice that Paul uses an 'if-that-then-that' style argument taking the idea of no bodily resurrection to its logical conclusion. You will notice that Paul uses the same idea twice in v13, and v16. If the dead are not raised, then, major implication Christ is not raised, Paul then goes on to draw out the other implications that flow from that. Paul shows in two different areas the implications of this false belief. These will be our two points, the implications for gospel preaching; and the implications for personal salvation.

Implications for gospel preaching

V12-13, 'Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.' V12 reveals why Paul has been priming the pump on the reality of Christ's resurrection. The gospel that we believe in order to be saved is built upon the lynchpin of Christ's resurrection, and if you deny the ability for the body to be raised, the biggest problem that creates is that Christ cannot then be raised. The question has been raised, is it possible that the Corinthians believed that Jesus could be raised and deny their own future resurrection? When it comes to sinners anything is possible, there are any number of wrong beliefs that we can hold inconsistent with other truths that we firmly believe. It has been suggested that maybe because Jesus was God He could have been resurrected, maybe there was a form of Docetism where Jesus only appeared to have a human nature was an underlying belief and led to this inconsistency, we don't know. But what we do see here is a common sin problem, we all hold wrong views inconsistent with the Bible's teaching. For example, we can believe God is sovereign and yet be anxious about the future. But there are other things that are more structural and foundational leading to larger consequences like claiming God is our Creator and the Creator of marriage but that homosexual marriage is ok; or that gender is fluid. These capitulations could be because of fear of man and knowing compromise, or because of being so brain washed by worldly ideas that the truth of the scripture is no longer your main authority. These sorts of compromises are serious and would warrant an intervention and church discipline if not repented of.

Paul takes the Corinthians to the heart of the problem, if bodies don't and can't rise, because of certain philosophical ideas taken as truth, then Jesus, who was fully human, who died a real human death cannot be resurrected from the dead. He has already shown that this cannot be true. Jesus resurrection was foretold by the Scriptures, produced by the power of God, and witnessed as a fact. Also it was the gospel of Jesus dying and resurrected for the Corinthians that was preached to them, which they believed, and has resulted in their salvation. The theoretical abstraction of this Greek influenced idea has met the immovable object of Christ's resurrection, and it is this false idea that must bend. We do not fit the facts of the Bible to fit worldly ideas, but worldly ideas are brought into submission against the clear truth of God. Please appreciate Paul's mode of thinking, look at how he reasons, look at how he makes worldly philosophy give way before biblical truth and not vice versa. If there is any idea that implies the denial of some biblical truth, then it is that idea that must go not the truth of the Bible.

Paul goes on next to map out three implications that relate to the preaching of the gospel, in v14-15, 'And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.' Firstly, the apostolic preaching which Paul has mapped out in v3-5 is in vain/futile/empty. The authority of the scriptures that the apostolic preaching relies on; the historical facts that the eye witness testimony bears witness to, it is all brought into question. Secondly, the response of the Corinthians, their faith in the message, it is faith in an untruth. And thirdly, all preachers are liars for claiming God has done what He did not do, if the dead are not raised. To deny any part of the gospel is to place your theory against a great edifice of what God has said and done in Christ and in your own life when He saved you. But if Christ has been raised then listen closely, because then God is speaking; His truth is heard; the gospel is saving and you can be saved through this message. We do have a certainty in the death and resurrection of Christ against which other messages can be tested and rejected if they disagree. Paul is helping the Corinthians think clearly by redirecting their thinking back to the gospel that saved them. If there is anything in their worldview or philosophy that contradicts the gospel it cannot be true, because the fact of Jesus dead and resurrected to save sinners is. Islam is not true because it denies that Jesus died, they teach that Judas in the appearance of Jesus died. The JW's teach that Jesus is not fully God and human, but an angel, and who did not resurrect bodily but only spiritually.

Implications for personal salvation

V16-19, 'For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.' Paul like a good teacher repeats himself but this time he branches out showing the implications of denying the bodily resurrection in the area of our personal experience of salvation. You will notice that Paul repeats the idea that to deny bodily resurrection carries the most serious problem of denying that Christ was resurrected; Paul then launches from there into showing how this would impact the salvation of a believer. Paul shows three key implications of denying the resurrection.

Firstly, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Paul is affirming two key truths here. Firstly, there is a sin problem. There is a God who is holy, with whom we have to do. We are created by Him, His will is law and we are rebels who have rejected Him and our greatest problem is that we have to give an account to Him for our sins. What is a sin is any violation of the will of both inwardly or outwardly. If Jesus did not rise from the dead that still does not remove the reality of sin, sin is an undeniable reality and a problem that we cannot solve but is solved by God through faith in Christ. This is the second key truth, God deals with our sins through faith in Christ. Our sins cannot be removed by us; our sins cannot be paid for by us; we cannot even live a life free from sin to avoid the judgement they deserve. We have a real sin problem that we cannot solve. God makes a way for us to be righteous in His sight. It is not through us being very good and trying to keep the law. Any attempt to try and earn righteousness with God by law will result in offering to God only filthy rags that will make us more worthy of judgement. We have no good to give to God. For this reason we need the righteousness we need before God to come from

Him and not ourselves. God provides this righteousness by Christ living a perfect life under the law to fulfill all the laws of God perfectly, and He does this as a representative on our behalf. But not only that we also still need to pay for our sins, Jesus also went to the cross as our substitute to die the death necessary to pay the penalty of our sins. God's law must be satisfied in a full payment and satisfaction of His justice, the death of Christ was a perfect offerer and offering appointed by God to fulfill all that was required for our forgiveness. The question remains, how do we get that righteousness. We cannot be righteous, Christ has lived and died that we might be righteous, but how does what He has done in our stead become ours? We receive it as a free gift by faith. We turn away from anything in ourselves for righteousness and we look to what Christ did for us. We stop putting our trust in what we can do and we rest in what He has done. We do not come pleading our goodness but our sinfulness and His goodness; we come not giving but asking for mercy; we come not confident in our righteousness, but penitent and ashamed.

But if Jesus has not risen from the dead, then our confidence is in one who cannot save. If He is still dead, that means He must have been sinner, that His sacrifice was insufficient. But because He is Risen we can know that our faith is not in the wrong person, it is not in vain. God raised Him as a testimony to the success of His work on our behalf.

This means that if you have trusted in Christ you no longer stand before God in your sins, you are in Christ. Your legal standing before Him is not one of condemned criminal; but forgiven child. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Paul tells us in Rom. 4:25 that Jesus was raised for our justification. The resurrection of Jesus Christ directly bears upon our legal standing before God as righteous. What a truth, what a hope, what joy is ours. Even if life is horrible, your sins are forgiven, you have escaped eternal judgement. We have true hope.

Secondly, Paul says that if Christ is not raised, 'then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.' There were various theories of the afterlife. Plato believed that the soul escaped the body and was reincarnated. Aristotle taught that the body and soul were one and that there was probably nothing after death. Some views taught that the spirit returns to some larger reality and loses its individuality like a drop of rain in the ocean. Paul gives us a little of the Christian view. A believer in Jesus Christ does not die, to never rise, but dies to be raised, and so he uses the word 'asleep.' But notice that the believer has fallen asleep 'in Christ.' When we are saved we are united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, we are one body with Him. And when we die, our soul is no longer united with our body, but we can never be severed from Christ. We are more secure in Him than in our own bodies. The Bible does not teach soul sleep, that we are unconscious until the resurrection; nor does it teach annihilation, that we cease to exist upon death; nor does it teach reincarnation, that we are in a cycle of living several lives. No, it teaches us that our souls are eternal. Once created, we have a likeness to God's own eternality in that we will never cease to exist. Human life has the quality, animal is not said to have any such quality. But the afterlife is not the next chapter of our adventure we call life, depending on what we did in this life we will go to one of two places. Those who have trusted in Jesus will go to Him in heaven, Rev. 6 portrays the souls of the martyrs in white robes in Christ's presence; Paul speaks about absent from the body and present with the Lord; to die is gain. Heaven is a cloud of witnesses of the spirits of righteous men made perfect. They are spoken of as worshipping and at peace. If someone does not believe in Jesus, they do not go to heaven but to a holding cell until the resurrection for judgement. It is not the final lake of fire but it is not

a good place. 2 Pet. 2:9 describes it as God keeping the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement. Death does not sweep us into our final state, that only happens when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead. Then all the dead will be raised for judgement, Dan. 12:2 says, 'And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.' It is at this time that all souls are returned to their bodies. The bodies of saints will be glorious but the bodies of unbelievers, we are not told what state they will be. Because Jesus is risen from the dead, your dead Christian relatives are only sleeping and will rise to eternal life. We believe that those infants that died in infancy and the mentally disabled will likewise be resurrected for glory. It is because He is risen that we will rise also. Paul has a lot more to say about this topic. But here he makes a direct application, because Jesus has risen from the dead the Christian has hope of overcoming death. Death is the great thief that steals our loved ones while we are alive and will finally inevitably have all of us. It seems the great and irresistible enemy, but Jesus has conquered death. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.' The death of our believing loved ones is not a final goodbye but a see-you-later, because He is risen.

Thirdly, if Jesus is not risen then, v19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.' 'If all Christianity yields is hope in this life and not the next, we are to be pitied above all because there we were, thinking we were spared from hell because our sins were paid for by Christ. But then we will stand before God for judgement and will not be forgiven. Even if Christianity yields a nice life in the here and now, what is the point if we gain the whole world but lose our eternal souls? I think this point is a most pertinent point for us today. Today there are many who are advocating cultural Christianity. Richard Dawkins the famous New Atheist who wrote the Selfish Gene is anti-religion. But when faced with the prospect of Islam taking over the UK he is happy to have cultural Christianity. The present immigration crisis with its strong religious groups coming in and eroding the history of western civilizations, many are leaning into the Christian roots of their nations to preserve their identity against the immigration crisis. Many are going back to traditional values in preference to the woke ideologies that have resulted in a complete breakdown of marriage and the family. A return to Christianity as a politically expedient tool is seen as desirable. Many are willing to ignore the controversial teachings about Jesus, that He is God, that He is the only Saviour who pays for our sins and reconciles sinners to God, that He will come again to judge the living and the dead, that He is holy and calls us to repent and turn from our sins, that He is our Creator who determines the purpose for our human lives and our sexual identities, that He forbids murder including abortion. If you want a Jesus without a resurrection; Jesus without a cross; Jesus as a political restraining grace but not as a Saviour from sin, you are of all people to be pitied. This life is not all there is; political solutions are not the main solution that we need; problems of state are not our biggest problems, we need salvation from sin. Jesus is a Saviour for sinners and He rose again to make a way for sinners to be saved and this fallen world to be made new. This is the heart of our faith and what we must believe. Like the Corinthians we will face many challenges to our faith, many ideas that say the resurrection is foolish or unnecessary; there will even be those who like parts of Christianity but not the offensive parts, but Paul calls us all to know what our faith is built upon and to stand firm in it.