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## OF FIRST IMPORTANCE

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### Part 2 of God's Work, Our Witness

Pastor Mark Driscoll | December 11, 2011

*1 Corinthians 15:1–11*

*<sup>1</sup> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*

*<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. <sup>11</sup> Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*

### INTRODUCTION

Yeah, well, Paul says—and this is where I'm going today—Paul says, as a result of what he believes—his theological convictions—he says, “I worked harder and I got more done than anybody,” which sounds like a pretty brash and bold statement. Until then, he says, “But it wasn't just me. I did it by the grace of God.” And so, generally, Christians tend to see the grace of God as, well, the grace of God forgives your sin when you blow it, which is true, but the grace of God also empowers your life so that you live differently. You live passionately. You live purposefully. You live meaningfully.

And I think that's really the issue that a lot of people think Christianity is just “You do your best. You're not going to do a very good job. And when you really mess up, God will forgive you, but he's not really there to help you. He's only there to forgive you when you've failed him.”

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, “The most important thing is to know who Jesus is and what he's done.” And he says, “I want to remind you.” And the truth is that Christians tend to forget. We tend to forget, well, it's about Jesus. We tend to forget about reading our Bible. We tend to forget about praying. We tend to forget that some people don't know Jesus.

And what happens is one generation believes something, the next generation assumes it, and the third generation denies it, and that really is the history of Orange County. The truth is there are some big churches here, and there are some people who love Jesus. But, man, there's a lot, a lot, a lot of work left to do, and there's still a very fast-growing younger generation that doesn't have Christian history. That whole group of people, a whole generation is pretty much absent from church. We feel like there's still a need for more people to meet Jesus, and we feel like we have an opportunity to be part of that.

*All right, Mars Hill, you're going to watch the sermon I just got done preaching here. People are still getting baptized, singing away. I've never seen a house this packed. And you'll see in this sermon, as soon as we started, literally everything broke. All the headsets for the volunteers broke. Two microphones broke. Everything broke. My voice broke. But God was gracious. It's a good day, and we hope you enjoy seeing what he did.*

### ONE OF THOSE DAYS

*[Congregation applauding]*

This could be one of those days that we tell our grandkids about. Your life is filled with many days, and occasionally there's one of those days. On one of those days something unusual happens. Some of you are going to meet Jesus today, and become Christians. He didn't tell you on your way. He knew you would've driven away. So he's going to spring it on you in the next hour. Your whole life and destiny is about to change. For some of you, you've been borrowing the faith of your parents, and it's time for you to really come to your adult convictions and walk away from adolescence and be part of what God is doing here in Orange County and around the world.

And it's my great honor on this day—I hope it is one of those days—to talk to you about one of the core values of Mars Hill Church, and that is gospel-centered theology. For those of you who don't know, we started as a little Bible study in 1996, and God has been exceedingly gracious to us to make us one of the largest and fastest-growing churches in the United States of America in a place where there has not, historically, been Christians. And as we spread, we're getting ready on January 15 to launch four churches in three states for two reasons—we love God and people—on one day,

January 15.

Am I losing a mic? Yes. All right. What do you guys want me to do? Yell loud? *[Congregation laughing]* 'Cause I could totally do that. Why don't you give me that, and if this doesn't work then I'll go with that. Come on out. We're going to make you feel awkward. Here's your volunteer, hardworking sound guy. *[Congregation applauding]* Thank you, bro. What's your name? Brandon, what time did you get up today? 5:30 in the morning. Wow, thank you. *[Congregation applauding]* Brandon is the holiest one among us. He was up at 5:30 in the morning. I'll make sure I've got these on. All right, here's what I'll do then, since we're having a little bit of technical difficulties, I'm going to pray for the Holy Spirit to fill the mic, and then we'll get back to work.

Father God, thank you so much for a time to come together. Thank you for all of these people giving us of their time, allowing us to love, and to serve, and to meet with them. And God, we do pray that this day would be one of those days, one of those days we tell our kids and our grandkids about. And so God, please allow me to serve well, allow us to learn about Jesus, and allow the technology to work, in Jesus' good name, amen.

## GOSPEL-CENTERED THEOLOGY

All right, here's where we're going to be. We're going to be in I Corinthians 15:1-11. This is a Bible. I know it's way too dark to read it, so I'll read it for you. Just trust me. It's written by a guy named Paul, one of the most influential thinkers and leaders in the history of the world. One historian says if you take two scales, and you put everyone on one side and Paul on the other, he outweighs them all. And he is here writing to a church that is very confused. It's an urban church filled with young people, new Christians, lots of sin, and lots of questions regarding gospel-centered theology.

### 1. CHRISTIANS ARE FORGETFUL

Number one, he says that Christians are forgetful, that Christians are forgetful. And so he says it in chapter 15, verse 1. "Now, I would remind you, brothers—" Well, you only remind people of things as they're prone to forget them, and Christians are prone to forget things. He's going to go on and talk about things that we're prone to forget.

Now, he talks about Jesus because we're prone to forget Jesus. We think about ourselves, and our family, and our friends, and our critics, and all of the people that are involved in our life, and sometimes we forget about Jesus. It's not that we don't know of him or haven't heard regarding him, but we're forgetful about him.

*David: I had a really dark heart. I became a Christian when I was seven. Jesus saved me at a summer camp, actually. In the season that we were in, before we came to Mars Hill Orange County, my heart just became increasingly cold to Christ. We were out of community. We weren't in a church and, as a result, my heart just increasingly became cold to Jesus, is I think the bottom line.*

We could forget, as well, about community, and he's writing to a church, saying, "You really need to help one another, serve one another, love one another, walk with one another because you're not going to make it on your own. You need the people of God to go with you."

He says, as well, that it's about Scripture. We tend to forget Scripture. Sometimes people can go days, weeks, months, years without actually reading the book that God wrote, and sometimes we can get really excited about other books that have been written, maybe even decent Christian books. And that's not a bad thing, but we forget about the book that God wrote.

He's going to go on, as well, to talk about sin. And sometimes we can forget that we are sinners, and other people are sinners, and sinners need help, and sinners need a Savior.

*Jasmine: I grew up in Orange County, Irvine. I've been an atheist. I was an atheist for most of my life. I became prideful and changed a lot for the worse. I was really into school and grades. And the minute anything went wrong, you've lost everything.*

And he's ultimately going to talk about forgiveness of sin and new life in Jesus Christ because we oftentimes can forget that we are forgiven. And some of you have even said things like this: "I know that God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself." Well, that just goes to prove that we've forgotten; that we're not a god above the God of the Bible, and if the God of the Bible forgives us, we're forgiven. We're not above him, and if he forgives us, we need to receive that forgiveness.

The key is to always come back to what is the truth, and who is Jesus. And each generation has to make its own decision regarding the person and work of Christ. And so Paul says we're prone to forget. And so there are some wonderful churches, some wonderful movements, some wonderful schools, some wonderful ministries, but there are many people who are prone to forget who Jesus is and what he's done, even in a place where there's lots of opportunity.

### 2. THE GOSPEL IS GOOD NEWS

And so, number two, we believe that the gospel is good news, and it's always coming back to that source of life and power, and that is the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So in chapter 15, verse 1, he speaks of, quote, "the gospel." And the gospel simply means good news. Good news.

This is different than good advice. What tends to happen a lot, when Christianity gets diluted and polluted, is that it's simply reduced to good advice. And all of a sudden, Christianity becomes a moral lifestyle, and the Bible becomes a bunch of examples. Here are some bad guys; don't be like them. Here are some good guys; do be like them. And the Bible is reduced to simply good advice. Good advice is not necessarily bad, but it's not necessarily

Christian because—

*[Loss of audio]* You can—this one is working.

You can disbelieve in the God of the Bible and still receive good advice. You can be an atheist, you can be a Mormon, you can be a Muslim, you can be Jewish, you could be just vague, general, skinny-jeans spiritual, and still receive good advice. The Bible is not primarily about good advice. It's about good news. It's not about good advice that you and I have a lot of things to do. It's about good news, some things that Jesus has done.

And the Bible is not a bunch of disconnected stories. It's not about David versus Goliath. It's not about Abraham leaving his family. It's not about Jonah being in a fish for three days. Those stories are in the Bible, but all the stories of the Bible are all subplots for the big story of the Bible: that God is Creator, that we've sinned and rebelled against him, that we've run from him, that he has come on a rescue mission to seek us, to serve us, to save us, that his name is Jesus Christ, that he lived a life that is exemplary, that he is perfect and without sin; but his goal was not just to be a good example, but to be a good Savior. And he died in our place, paying our penalty for our sin on the cross. Three days later, he rose—this is where Paul's going to go in 1 Corinthians 15—and that, ultimately, he doesn't just make us better; he makes us new.

And it's not just good advice—"Here's some things to improve your life"—it's good news. He says it from the cross. "It is finished." All the work of salvation is done. We trust in him. We receive new life from him. We don't then just become better people. We become new people, different people by the grace of God, and that's the good news.

*Jasmine: The Holy Spirit softened my heart that day because before it was very hard. I don't know. I still think about, "Wow, he changed me." That means he must be really powerful because I was really, really prideful. But I know he did it because I really wouldn't have done it myself, you know?*

When the good news is reduced to the good advice, what Christianity ends up becoming is a brand, and people can get converted to a brand and a lifestyle without ever actually knowing Jesus, loving Jesus, belonging to Jesus, experiencing that newness of life from Jesus. You know things have gone astray when people come to the Bible, just saying, "I need to get some good advice." Friends, there's good advice all over the world. There's only one place to get good news, and that is that there's a Savior. He's the Creator God. His name is Jesus. He loves you. He cares for you. He doesn't just make you better; he makes you new.

### 3. THE GOSPEL MUST BE PREACHED

Number three, we believe that the gospel must be preached. This is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:1. Yes, we're still in the first verse. He says, quote, "I preached to you." And so what you are doing today, right now, is an act of worship. You're listening to the preaching of the Word of God.

Our God is a speaking God. Our God is a communicating God. Our God is a Trinitarian God: one God, three persons. They have constant unbroken union and communion: God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit, eternally existing as one God. They communicate with one another. That's magnificent.

So when God goes to make the world, he speaks it into existence. That's how powerful the Word of God is. God creates our first parents, Adam and Eve, and he speaks to them. And after they sin, he comes speaking to them again, and he sends a succession of prophets to speak to us. He sends leaders in the New Testament to speak to us, that God ultimately speaks to us through the Scriptures.

I know some of you would love to hear from God. You wish God would talk to you. I'm telling you, if you read the book that God wrote, God will speak to you. That's the primary way that God speaks today. Our God is a speaking God. He's a communicating God, and one of the ways that he communicates to us is through the preaching of his Word. And so God has, from the beginning, sent forth preachers, prophets, proclaimers, truth tellers, teachers to open the Word of God and to communicate to the people of God.

And I'll tell you what, this is one of the most amazing things of my whole life. I grew up non-Christian, jack Catholic. I believed in good advice, not good news. I didn't know Jesus. I thought that the Bible was just a bunch of things for me to do to try to be a better person. Some Catholics know and love Jesus. I wasn't one of them. It wasn't the church's fault. It was my fault. And everything changed as I started to hear the Word of God preached.

Somebody got up on a Sunday, a good man, and he just opened the Bible and he taught it. And I remember the Holy Spirit confirming in me, "That's the book that God wrote. This is the truth. This is who God is. This is who I am. This is who Jesus is. This is what Jesus has done." And my life has never been the same.

If you come to Mars Hill, we open the Bible. We go through the Bible. We like the Bible. We talk about Jesus. And God has multiplied that in an extraordinary way, to where, as I said, now we're working on churches in four states. We do use video. And some people say, "Well, does it matter if the preacher is in the room?"

Here's the truth: What matters is whether or not the Word of God is in the room. What matters is whether or not the truth of God is in the room. What matters is whether or not the truth of the Word of God about the person of Jesus is preached. And if it is, the Holy Spirit shows up, changes lives, and makes a difference. The power is not in the preacher; the power is in the truth. The power is not in the preacher; the power is in the truth of the Word of God.

Friends, it is such a great honor to be able to preach and teach to you. And Paul says that because we tend to forget things, because we tend to reduce

Christianity down to a brand and a moral lifestyle of good advice, we need to constantly be preached at. Somebody has to open the Bible and lovingly course-correct us and reveal to us who and what is going on in the world in regards to God.

#### **4. THE GOSPEL MUST BE RECEIVED**

Number four, we believe that the gospel must be received. He says in chapter 15, verses 1–2, “Which you received, in which you stand,” like a soldier holding their ground, “and by which you are being saved.” Salvation is a constant process. It starts with what we call justification, where you are declared righteous in the sight of God because of the person and work of Jesus and faith in him.

It continues with something called sanctification, where you learn and you grow. And as a Christian, you’re maturing and changing through the course of your life, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and it ends in glorification, where one day you die and you look Jesus in the eye and everything is ultimately forever concluded insofar as your maturing goes. And you rise one day to be with him, like him, for him, forever.

So he says your salvation is receiving the truth about Jesus and then standing in it, continuing as a Christian, as your salvation keeps growing, as you keep maturing. He goes on to say, “if you hold fast to the word I’ve preached to you—unless you believed in vain.”

Now, let me ask you this. Have you received Jesus? Not morality. Have you received Jesus as Lord, God, Savior, King, and Christ? Not just good example, big therapist, the giver of good advice, but actually the giver of good news? Have you borrowed the faith of your parents or your family? You were born into a Christian family or home, but you’ve never really come to your own personal relationship with Jesus?

Looking around, I know that many of you are young, and I know that many of you probably come from church families, and church backgrounds, and maybe you have godly parents, and we rejoice in that and we praise God for that. But have you come to your own faith? Have you received it for yourself? Are you standing in it for yourself? Are you persevering in it for yourself? And are you standing in that faith, maturing in, growing in that faith?

This is really important. We want to be a church here for all ages, all races, all cultures, all backgrounds, but let me just say this plainly and clearly. The bull’s-eye for us is young twenty-somethings, thirty-somethings. We want those people to come to their own faith in Christ.

If you’re here today, it begins with you. Some of you may be carrying on the legacy of faith in your family. Some of you may become today, patriarchs and matriarchs, saying, “You know what? The history of my family has not been great, so maybe it starts with me. Maybe one day when the kids and the grandkids tell the story of the life change in our family, it starts today with me becoming a man or a woman who receives Jesus Christ, stands in it, grows by it for the rest of my life, and hands that on to my children.”

Friends, that’s what we want for you. Most fools are thinking about a good time. Most Christians should be thinking about a good legacy: two, three, four, five generations. Who do you want your kids to marry? Who do you want your grandkids to marry? They’re going to marry someone like you or someone like the person you’re with. What do you want your legacy to be?

This is a big issue for us at Mars Hill. See, Paul is a guy talking to the Corinthians: young, urban, sexual, confused, educated, a bit proud, pretentious young church. And he tells them, “You’ve got to receive the God of the Bible. You’ve got to stand there. Don’t move. And you’ve got to persevere to the end.” That’s what God wants from you because he loves you.

How about you? See, this could be one of those days that you tell your kids and grandkids about. And I pray for many of you, especially you young men, that this would be one of those days for you. “Yes, in the grace of God, now 1 Corinthians 13 makes sense.” “When I was a boy, I thought like a boy and I acted like a boy and I spoke like a boy. And when I became a man, I put boyish ways behind me.” We believe the gospel must be received.

#### **5. THE GOSPEL IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING**

Number five, we believe that the gospel is the most important thing. He says in 1 Corinthians 15:3, “For I delivered to you as of first importance—” Now, that’s a massive statement. You think of all the information today. Paul says, of all the information on the earth, that has ever been on the earth, is on the earth, or will ever be on the earth, there’s one bit of information that supersedes, rises above all others. It’s of first importance, and that’s about the person and work of Jesus. That’s about what the truth of the Bible reveals about the Savior of the world.

I want you to study hard. If you’re in school, I want you to study hard. If you’re in a trade, I want you to master that trade. Whatever city or town you’re in, I want you to know what’s going on there. I want you to love and serve that community and seek the well being of everyone who is there, but never forget the most important thing is the Word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, the big story about the good news. That’s the most important thing.

How many of you are really passionate about learning? What I would say is if you’re not passionate about learning the Word of God and getting to know the Son of God, rather than just doing it out of guilt, I would ask you to first pray. “Holy Spirit, you wrote the Scriptures. Holy Spirit, you convict of sin. Holy Spirit, you lead us into the truth. Holy Spirit, give me an appetite to know the Word of God. Give me an appetite to love the Son of God. Give me a desire to grow in my knowledge of the good news, that which is of first importance.”

Some of you will wrongly think this is an old book. It’s not. It’s an eternal book, and so it’s always timely. Your whole life will change if you continually come back to that which is of first importance, the Word of God about the good news regarding Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

## 6. THE GOSPEL IS UNCHANGING

In addition, number six, we believe that the gospel is unchanging. This is very controversial and very important. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, he says, "What I delivered to you as of first importance is what I also received." What Paul is saying is, he says, "You know, when it comes to the gospel, the good news, the story of Jesus, I didn't make this up, and it didn't start with me."

Okay, let me just say this. Be wary of any religion that started in America, okay? Just, like, just as a general rule, all right, be wary of any religion that started in Southern California, right? Our goal is not to believe anything new, but to believe things that are true and communicate them in new ways. So we're not changing the content. We may change the delivery system, using technology and such, but Paul says, "What I received, I pass on to you." You see that? Saying, "The truth was before me. It came to me, and now I pass it on to you."

The gospel is first preached in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve sin against God. God comes, and he preaches what is called the *protoevangelion*, the first gospel. And he says, "All right, Adam and Eve, you've sinned." I'm paraphrasing. "And Satan, you have done a horrendous evil, and so I'm going to send someone. He'll be a male Son born of a woman, and he will do battle with Satan, and though Satan will harm him, he will crush Satan." Yes, we believe in real evil. We believe in God and an enemy of God. We believe that this world really is a battlefield. That's why it's hard and painful.

And we do believe that God is the first one who preaches the good news of the gospel. And in the middle of sin, he says Jesus is coming through the womb of Mary. That's in Genesis 3. And then the gospel is to be preached all the way up until Revelation 14, and that's the final time in the Bible that the gospel is preached. And the Bible says it's preached by an angel near the end of time, whenever that might be.

In between God preaching the first gospel and an angel preaching the gospel for the last time, we are to tell the story of Jesus. We're to tell the story of the Bible with clarity, and conviction, and compassion. And it is never to be changed. Let me say this. We are not to innovate the Scriptures or the truth. We're to receive it and hand it on. The message belongs to God, not to us. We deliver the mail. We don't write the mail.

So you may come to Mars Hill. You're like, "I've heard all this before." Praise God, then we're not a cult. *[Congregation laughing]* Praise God, then we're not a cult. *[Congregation applauding]* So some of you'd come, and you'd say, "Okay, cool website. You know, people seem interesting. This is a weird place to meet. I heard you've gone out of state and use technology." At the bottom of it all, at the base of it all, the engine driving the whole thing: Jesus is God, Jesus is God, Jesus is God. Sin is the problem; the cross is the solution. Jesus is alive. There's hope for you. Same message for two thousand years. Christians are to be a band that just plays one song and plays it loud and proud, amen? *[Congregation applauding]*

*David: The distortion is it's all about me, and the truth is it's all about Jesus. Man, it changes everything. You know, it kind of takes the load off from, like, I've got to fix myself and save myself to, oh no, that's what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and that's what the Holy Spirit is doing in me. I was living in such a way of when I was being religious, of, okay, I should do this, I should do this, versus going, "Oh, Christ loves me, I will respond to his love."*

## 7. THE GOSPEL IS ABOUT JESUS' CROSS

Number seven, we believe that the gospel is about Jesus' cross. You can't talk about Jesus without talking about the cross. He says in chapter 15, verse 3, "that Christ died for our sins." Now, Christ died. You need to know this.

God comes to earth. He is opposed by religious people, hated and despised. He is ultimately arrested. The political leaders don't like him because he keeps saying he's Lord, which would make him above the political rulers. The religious leaders don't like him because he keeps saying he's God. And so, ultimately, they murder him. They put him to death.

Now, some would say Jesus didn't die. He did die. And some would say, "Oh, Jesus died on the cross for your sins," but we say it so flippantly, so quickly, so hastily, that sometimes people don't even really understand what that means, that "God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." See, the cross was something done by us: we killed God. And it was something done for us: God saved us. And what Jesus did on the cross is he died for us.

See, the wage for sin is death. The reason we have sickness, the reason we have division, the reason we have wars, and atrocity, and famine, the reason why the world is the way that it is is not because this is the way that God made the world. When God made the world in Genesis 1:31, he said it was all very good. You say, "Well, something has gone very wrong." Yes: sin.

So Jesus comes, and he lives without sin. He is God become a man. He adds to his divinity humanity. God comes on a rescue mission for his enemies. That's amazing. How many of you would suffer and die for your enemies? That's what God does in Christ. So when it comes to being Christians, we're not just undeserving of God's love and forgiveness; we're ill deserving.

Jesus goes to the cross, and he dies for our sins. We call this penal substitutionary atonement. Death is the penalty. Substitution is what Jesus did, so that our sin could be atoned for and forgiven. Christians never get over this. And see, Martin Luther says rightly, that religion is the default mode of the human heart. So you know what we want to do? We want to pay God back. We don't pay God back. We trust Jesus. You say, "Well, I feel so bad." Right, but Jesus is so good. "Well, what can I do?" Nothing, because Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished." The love of God, the forgiveness of God, the salvation of God, it's not cheap. It's priceless, and so we can't earn, merit, or deserve it. It has to be given as a gift, and that's a gift of grace.

So I want you to know this. When Jesus went to the cross, he died for our sins, for your sins and mine, and something called the Great Exchange happened. All your sin went to Jesus. All of it. Sins you haven't even committed yet, all your condemnation, all your guilt, all your filth, all your

shame, all your failures.

How many of you feel that? Now, when your buddies are around, or you're out on Friday night, or you've got a few drinks in you, or you're trying to keep yourself busy with your life, you don't think about it. But how many of you, in those quiet moments, you feel it? "Man, what am I doing? I'm not really excited about who I am, or what I'm doing, or where I'm going. And as I look back on my life, I have some real regrets, if I'm honest. I wouldn't talk about that with my buddies because those guys would just make fun of me. But in those lonely, quiet moments, I feel it."

You need to know that all of that went to Jesus. He was alone, he was cursed, he was defiled, he was broken, he was ashamed, and all of his righteousness came to you. So in Christ, you are clean; in Christ, you are loved; in Christ, you are forgiven; in Christ, you are redeemed; in Christ, you are adopted into a new family, the church, with brothers and sisters, spiritually speaking, and God, who's the Father, and you have a new future. And Christians never get over that.

*Jasmine: It just makes me feel really loved to know that he did all that for me, even though I don't deserve it. And I think I'm only one person and he's doing this for so many people.*

Now, I'll tell you three things. There are many things that the cross of Jesus does, if you trust in him. Number one, you're forgiven. Jesus says this from the cross. "Father," what? "Forgive them." Who? His murderers! Let me tell you, if Jesus can forgive his murderers, at his moment of murder, he can forgive anyone and everyone of anything and everything.

How many of you really need that confirmation that you're forgiven? How many of you have done that? You've said or done something horrendous? Because see, our sin is commission (we do bad things); it's omission (we don't do what we're supposed to do). We sin in thought, word, deed, motive. How many of you have sinned, and someone has just looked at you and said, "I forgive you"? How does that feel? Doesn't that feel like a weight off the shoulders, like a guilt off the conscience? Isn't that life-giving?

"You forgive me? Thank you. You're not going to make me do anything? You're not going to punish me? You're not going to yell at me? You're not going to tell everyone? You're not going to destroy me?" "No, I just forgive you." Wow. Jesus just forgives you. See, when we sin, we do sin against others, but we ultimately sin against God. That's why the psalmist says, "Against you only, Lord God, have I sinned." And Jesus would look you in the eye, as a friend, face-to-face, and say, "I forgive you." You just need to receive that.

Number two, Jesus cleanses you on the cross. Because see, forgiveness is about the sins we've committed. Cleansing is about the sins that have been committed against us. Some of you have had horrible sin done to you. We live in a day when one of you three women has been sexually assaulted, one of you six men has been sexually assaulted. Your parents' home blew up. Your friends have betrayed you. People have lied to you, cheated on you, taken advantage of you. People that you gave your heart to just absolutely destroyed you and betrayed you.

In Christ, you're clean. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter what's been done to you. It's about what Jesus has done for you. And so in the Bible, what color do God's people usually wear? White. Why? Because they're forgiven and clean.

*David: Well, I think that Jesus has constantly been after me. I think that I have been the prodigal son, when you kind of wake up, and you go, "Jesus, I'm—" for me specifically—"Jesus, you know, I'm sorry. My heart has been just black and cold to you and to my wife, and I'm sorry." It's that, you know— What has happened in the last eight months is that—that picture of the prodigal son, of when the prodigal first started going back, and while the son was still a far way off, that the father ran to him. And what I love about that is even before the son got anything out, he ran to him, and that has been the picture of what Jesus has done in my heart and is continuing to do in my heart and in my marriage. Because of Jesus, I'm able to love my wife. Because of Jesus, I'm able to smile again. Because of Jesus, I'm like, "Man, when is the last time I've been anxious?" You know, because of Jesus, it's just—life feels a lot freer, instead of this prison that I was living in apart from Jesus.*

This changes how we even view people. You're not just a victim; you're clean. You're not just dirty; you're clean. You're not just defiled; you're clean. You're not just damaged goods; you're clean. Jesus took all the filth. He gave you all of his righteousness. In Christ, you're forgiven and clean.

You know what? This comes down to the issue of identity. So many people today are trying to figure out who they are, or trying to invent who they are, trying to create who they are. That's what leads to every problem that we have. They want to look like they've got it together, or they don't, and they're tired of pretending and hiding. Jesus comes and says, "You're forgiven, and you're clean."

And number three then, makes you new. You know what that means? You get a new mind. You start to think differently. How many of you have experienced that? You get new desires. You're like, "I want to read the Bible. I want to be with God's people. I want to get in a Community Group. What? What has happened to me? I want to sing to Jesus, even though my voice sounds like I've been captured by al-Qaeda. I can't sing, but I want to sing to Jesus! All of a sudden, people are telling me their problems, and I'm talking about Jesus: 'Well, what do you think about Jesus? And how is Jesus involved in this? And what does Jesus mean to you?'"

See, when you become a Christian, you're forgiven, clean, and new: new mind, new desires, new community, new identity, new destiny. Christianity is not about doing better and trying harder. It's about being new, forgiven, clean, and new. And I'll tell you, that's my story. That's my story.

## **8. THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT JESUS**

Number eight, we believe the Bible is all about Jesus. This is the book about Jesus. It's all about Jesus. That's what he says in 1 Corinthians 15:3,

“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” The Bible, he’s saying, is about Jesus. It’s not just about what to do. It’s about what’s been done.

Here’s the truth, friends. The Bible is not primarily about you, but it’s for you. But it’s about Jesus. And see, sometimes, “Oh, what does it say about me? What does it say about me? What does it say about me?” You’re not the hero. All right, the whole book is not about you. It’s about him, and his love for you, and his salvation of you, and his good news for you.

So at Mars Hill, we believe the whole Bible is about Jesus. This is why the Bible can be taught, but if Jesus isn’t proclaimed, the Bible wasn’t rightly taught. What can happen then is teaching just becomes therapy instead of salvation, how to feel better and do more, not how to meet him. I’ll give you some ways that this goes astray. If you don’t see that the Bible is firstly and foremostly about Jesus, you end up moralizing it. It just becomes morality.

Let me say this. We’re not immoral, but we’re not moral. I’ve got to be very careful with that. Some people are like, “They said not to be moral. Amen, this is the church for me.” That’s not what we’re saying. What we’re not saying is we want you to be immoral, but what we’re not saying is we want you to be moral. What we want you to be is a Christian. We want you to meet the Jesus of the Bible, we want the Holy Spirit to live in you, and we want the life of Christ to start to be made manifest in your life, so that you increasingly become more like Jesus. We connect it all to Jesus, and we believe that the whole Bible is ultimately about Jesus.

## 9. JESUS IS ALIVE

Number nine, here’s the good news. We believe Jesus is alive. He’s not dead. He’s not just a dead example like a Martin Luther King or a Mahatma Gandhi. They lived a nice life. We could read the biography and get some interesting observations of good advice. The good news is not only did he die, he rose to conquer death and sin that causes death.

Here’s how Paul says it— This is crazy! If you’ve been a Christian for a while, you’re like, “Jesus rose from death.” Think about it! Just think about going to somebody’s funeral, crying, meeting with the family, going back to work two days later, and getting a text. “Hey, you want to do lunch?” Wow! That was unexpected. *[Congregation laughing]* This is amazing.

See, the problem is sin, and the result is death, and the answer is Jesus’ resurrection. Paul says it this way, 1 Corinthians 15:4–8, “that he was buried.” All right, he’s dead. “That he was raised on the third day,” just like he promised, “in accordance with the Scriptures.” Why? Because the whole Bible is about Jesus. “That he appeared to Cephas”—that’s Peter—“and then to the twelve,” one of whom was Thomas the doubter, saying, “I don’t believe it. Until I see the scar on his side and in his hands, I don’t believe it.” Jesus shows up, Thomas falls down, as we all should, and says, “My Lord and my God,” and he worships the risen Jesus.

“Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time.” Some people say, “Oh, they hallucinated.” Five hundred people don’t have the same hallucination. Amen? You’re like, “Yeah, we all hallucinated, then we went and saw a movie.” No, you went to a movie, all five hundred of you. A hallucination is a very private event, right potheads? It’s a very private event. *[Congregation applauding]*

“Most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.” And what Paul is saying is those who saw Jesus risen from death, yeah, a few of them are dead, but most of them are still alive. You can walk right up, “Did you see Jesus?” “Yep, he was alive.” He had breakfast with people, he hugged people, he taught, and he’s going to go on to say that he hung out for forty days. He even hung out with his family so that even his own mother, who was a devout Jewish gal, started worshipping her Son as God. So did Jesus’ two brothers. That’s where he’s going to go.

“Then he appeared to James.” That’s his brother. How many of you could get your brother to worship you as Lord, God, Savior, Redeemer, King, Creator, and Christ? No! *[Congregation laughing]* Big brothers do horrible things to little brothers, right? Big brothers do things to little brothers that, were they not brothers, you’d be incarcerated for doing those things. *[Congregation laughing]* Right? Swirlies, wedgies, acts of random violence, ninja practice; horrible things get done to little brothers, horrible.

Jesus was the big brother. His little brothers worshiped him as God. And they’re devout Jewish guys who know, “If he’s not God, we’re going to hell because we’re worshipping a false god.” Jesus’ brother, James, goes on to be a pastor, writes a book of the Bible called James. I mean, it’s amazing.

And the burden of proof is on those who would deny the resurrection of Jesus because Christianity is not just a philosophy. It’s not a therapy. It’s not a psychology. It’s not a sociology. It’s history. Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus rose. That means something. That never happened before. That’ll never happen again. He’s unique, distinct. There’s no one like him. There’s no one who does what he does. And those who would say, “He didn’t rise from death,” you have got to account for all of these lines of evidence. Jesus is alive. He then ascended back into heaven.

And if you don’t believe it, here’s what Paul says. “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” Paul says, “I saw.” Some of you say, “Well yeah, Paul’s a pastor, wrote the Bible.” He didn’t start that way. He started off hating Jesus, hating Christians, maybe like some of you who are going to become Christians today. Welcome. We see that he is murdering, in the book of Acts, an early church deacon named Stephen. Murdering him! If you put on your resume, “What are you good at?” “I’m good at murdering deacons.” Right? You’re not pro-Jesus. Amen? You’re on the other team. To Christians in the first century, his name is Bin Laden. I mean, that’s how they’re looking at this guy, right? He hates God’s people, and he wants them dead.

So how did Paul become a Christian? His name was Saul, and he changed it to Paul. How did he start worshipping Jesus? Do you know what it took? A magnificent event. He’s murdering Christians, and then Jesus comes down from heaven, blinds him, knocks him off the horse, and says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “What do you mean?” “Well, you’re hurting the church; those are my people.” “Well, who are you?” “I’m Jesus. Don’t

mess with me!” “Oh, oh.”

The early church, when they hear Paul becomes a Christian, they’re like, “Yeah, we believe it, sure, yeah.” Can you imagine Paul showing up at your small group? “All right, everybody close their eyes. We’ll pray.” “No, no, no, no, no. I’m keeping one eye open. I am not closing my eyes so you can whack me. You’re going to do something nefarious. I heard about you.” Paul had his whole life changed because he met the risen Jesus. And what Paul is saying is, “Trust me, he’s alive. Trust me, death is conquered. Trust me, sin is forgiven. Trust me, I didn’t believe it, but I can’t disprove it.”

## 10. JESUS SAVES FROM SIN AND RELIGION

Number ten, we believe that Jesus saves from sin and religion. This is a distinguishing part of Mars Hill because most of the time, Christianity is presented as, “You sinners need to repent!” And then all the religious people cheer, “Yay, we’re not like them. We’re better than they are.” And the sinners think, “Oh man, you’re trying to make me religious.” And then sometimes religious people demonstrate hypocrisy. There’s adultery or something like that. And then all the sinners are like, “Well, you’re no better than us. You’re just a hypocrite. At least we’re authentic.” *[Congregation laughing]*

And here’s the truth. There are two enemies of Jesus: sin and religion. Two enemies of Jesus: sin and religion. Sin is about innovation; religion is about tradition. Sin is about nonconformity; religion is about conformity. Sin breaks the rules; religion keeps the rules. Sinners tend to be liberal; religious people tend to be conservative. Sin tends to be immoral; religion tends to be very moral. Sin tends to be disobedient; religion tends to be very obedient. Sometimes sin is lazy; and religion can be very hardworking. Sin tends to be visible. You can just tell. Religion tends to be invisible because it lives in the heart, and the mind, and the motives. Sin uses people; religion judges people. Sin is unrighteous; religion is self-righteous.

Before Paul became a Christian, he was a sinner, but his real problem was religion. Sometimes we forget that. He says elsewhere, “I was a Pharisee.” That’s the strictest of the strict. He said, “I studied under this leading rabbi named Gamaliel.” So he went to, like, the best theological school. He probably memorized whole books of the Old Testament in the original Hebrew.

Here’s what he says in 1 Corinthians 15:9–10, “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am.” He says, “Here was my problem. I was religious. I was so religious that I was judging people and condemning people and opposing people and hurting people. I wasn’t like Jesus.”

So, two things. If you’re here, and you’re a sinner, repent of your sin. What that means is agree with God that you need a Savior, and his name is Jesus. But if you’re here, and you’re religious, repent of your religion, your haughtiness, your self-righteousness, your boastfulness, your record-keeping of wrongs, all the good things you’ve done and how you’re better than others.

Now me, I tend to gravitate toward being religious because, see, I grew up in a poor neighborhood, working class, but I was the kid who never drank. I never did drugs. I never even took a puff of a cigarette. Wasn’t a Christian, but I was really hardworking, and I was a good guy. And then I started reading the Bible, and I realized guys like me murdered Jesus, and we were the villains and not the heroes, and that it’s not about me and my performance and my religion and my devotion and my zeal and my hard work and my great effort. It’s about Jesus’ grace, and his love, and his mercy.

If you’re a sinner, repent of your sin and trust in Jesus. If you’re religious, repent of your religion and trust in Jesus. Jesus has two enemies, not one: sin and religion. Lastly—you know, when a preacher says “lastly,” do you know what it means? Nothing. *[Congregation laughing]* It just means he senses you’re not paying attention, and he would like to fix that for a long time.

## 11. GOD’S GRACE RESULTS IN MAKING DISCIPLES AND PLANTING CHURCHES

Number eleven, we believe that God’s grace results in making disciples and planting churches. First Corinthians 15:10–11, “And his grace toward me,” he says, “was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than all of them—or any of them.” Doesn’t that sound a little arrogant? Just read that. “I worked harder than everyone.” Whoa, that sounds a little arrogant.

He goes on, “Though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.” So we believe that God’s grace results in making disciples and planting churches.

Some of you have a very anemic, reduced, diluted view of God’s grace. That’s his unmerited favor, his undeserved love, his affection toward you. And your view of God is that God is very far away, and you’re supposed to try very hard. And when you fail, God is disappointed, and he’ll judge you, but Jesus will forgive you because he knows how pathetic you are. That’s not very motivating, right? It’s like God saying, “Run through the wall. I know you can’t. And when you fall down, I’ll tell you that I forgive you for being pathetic. Now get up and run again.” “Really, that’s my life? Do I get a helmet? Do I get a cup? Do I get a day off? Like, this is a really hard job description. Will I ever go through the wall?” “No!” “What if I stop running?” “You’ll go to hell!” “Wow, this is a really—I don’t know. Wow, okay. And we’re not supposed to drink either? Like, how do we deal with all of this?” *[Congregation laughing]*

Here’s the truth. God’s grace does forgive you when you fail, but most of the time, it’s God’s grace empowering you to be who you cannot be, to do what you cannot do, by a power you do not possess. God’s grace doesn’t just pick you up when you fail. It keeps you strong so that you don’t have to.

So he says, “I got a lot done, and I worked harder than everyone, and my life has really counted, and it’s made a significant difference, by the grace of God, the strengthening, empowering, gifting grace of God.” The grace of God empowers you to be a new person. Yes, God’s grace is there to forgive you when you fail, but it’s there before you fail to change your heart, to change your mind, to change your desires, to reorient your course of life, to

make you a different person, to give you meaning and value and purpose and pleasure.

Jesus is with you, that Jesus is in you, that Jesus is for you; that if you do fail, Jesus will forgive you. But because Jesus is with you, you don't have to say yes to sin. You could say yes to Jesus. You don't have to say yes to condemnation and guilt and shame and waking up and thinking, "Is there any hope for me?" Yes, there is, and the hope is for you. It's not in you; it's for you in Christ and the grace of God.

And so you will meet people whom the grace of God has empowered. You're like, "How do they do it? How do they live that kind of free, joyful, fruitful, happy, hopeful, biblical life?" By the grace of God, by the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian. And so the Christian life is not something you live for God. It's something that God lives for you in Christ. It's something that Christ lives in you. It's something that Christ lives through you, and this leads to an explosive, passionate, joy-filled life. This is the best life of all! There's no guilt, or shame, or condemnation in it, and there's eternity at the end of it!

So at Mars Hill, we believe this means people need Jesus and people who meet Jesus get absolutely filled with the Holy Spirit and joy and hope, and they introduce other people to Jesus and lives get changed and legacies get changed and lineages get changed and people meet Christ. We've already seen over one thousand people at our church get baptized as new Christians this year. This thing keeps exploding. We can't explain it, but Jesus is alive. He's the senior pastor. He's good. He's grabbing people. He's making a difference and he invites you to be on mission with him.

And we're hoping, we're trusting, we're praying. Yeah, four churches, three states, one day. Why? He's alive, so anything's possible. We're trusting you to give. We're trusting you to serve. We're trusting you to care. We're trusting you to pray. I'm here to love and serve. I'm here to hope and give. But ultimately, this is your church, this is your Jesus, this is your city, and this is your time. *[Congregation applauding]*

## PRAYER

Father God, I thank you so much for the living and active Word of God. Holy Spirit, thank you that you inspired the Scriptures to be written, that you illuminate our understanding of them. Thank you that they're all about Jesus, that we're not just here for a sociological lecture, a psychological lecture, a philosophical lecture. We're here to meet with the God who made the heavens and the earth. We're here to have sin forgiven, to have filth cleansed, to have lives made new.

God, I pray for Mars Hill Church. I pray for all of our locations. I pray for the more than four hundred churches in Acts 29. I pray for the movement of two hundred thousand people that are part of this tribe that you've built and we get to be a part of. God, we don't understand it. Like Paul, we would say we work hard and amazing things get done. But really, it's by the grace of God, the strengthening, empowering, encouraging, motivating, transforming, life-altering, destiny-shaping, world-shaking grace of God poured out through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, we confess that Paul is right. Sometimes we forget. We need to be reminded of who you are and what you've done and who we are in you and what we can do because of you. And so, God, as we come to respond, I pray you would take those who are not Christians, and that you would make them Christians and give them a deep desire in their heart to meet Jesus. For those, Lord God, who have been borrowing the faith of their parents, and I pray they'd come to their own. For those, Lord God, who have been hypocritical and living religious or sinful lives, that they would come to a real life-giving relationship with Jesus. And, Lord Jesus, thank you so much that we get to be part of what you're doing. We get to see lives changed, including our own. And we thank you for that. And we say thanks, in Jesus' good name. Amen.

*Note: This transcript has been edited for readability.*