

Relativism

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Date: 10 March 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. Well, the last few weeks, as I said, we've been working through 2 Corinthians. And what's interesting is we've been working through this book is that we've been learning about a lot of dangers Christians face, not physical dangers, but spiritual dangers, different teachings and philosophies that we encounter in the world around us, which are in conflict with the truth, which are in conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we've been learning about these because over 2,000 years, nothing has changed. The same threats and the same dangers exist today as they did in the time that Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians. And these teachings that we've been looking at, we're threatening the Corinthian Christians as much as they're threatening Christians today. And so Paul writes this letter to Corinthians. A number of reasons he writes it, which we've seen, but one of those reasons is to show these false teachings up for what they really are. And so, for example, we looked at the prosperity gospel a few weeks back. Popular, very popular in the world today. It's just as it was back then. And we saw how different that teaching is, even though it's called the prosperity gospel, it's actually not the gospel at all. It's completely different from what the real gospel taught in the

Bible is. And then last week, again, you'll remember, if you were here, we looked at our society's worldview, how people look at the world generally in society, and how different that is from how the gospel teaches us to look at the world. So all of these different philosophies and ideas that conflict with the gospel that we read in the Bible. Well, this morning, we're going to be looking at another one, another idea or philosophy that we face in our world that is a danger for us and our children. And that is something called relativism. That can be your fancy new word for the day.

Relativism. But it's a fancy word, but it's got a simple meaning. What it means is the idea that truth is relative, that truth is not absolute. That what I believe is true for me, but it's not necessarily true for you or someone else. That's the idea of relativism. And I'm sure as I describe it, you're going, wow, that actually sounds a lot like the world today, doesn't it? It's this idea that rather being a lighthouse to guide us, truth is just another boat floating around and changing its location with the winds and the currents of modern opinion. What was true 50 years ago is not necessarily true today. That's what relativism says. And it's a really popular idea because, I mean, you can understand why it's so popular. If truth is not absolute, then you can pick and choose what truth you want to believe that best suits your lifestyle, right? If something you come across doesn't suit your lifestyle or what you want to do with your life, you just choose not to believe it. You get to decide what's right and wrong for you. Well, it seems as well, this is exactly what was happening in the

Corinthian church. They had heard the gospel from Paul, but they were also listening to other teachings and they were picking and choosing what they wanted to take on board that best suited them.

And so this section in the Bible, in his letter, rather, Paul is warning the Corinthians about the danger of that kind of relativism, that danger of that kind of picking and choosing what truth I want to take on board. And his warning in this passage is really strong. If you read it and understand what he's saying, he tells them in verse one, not to receive God's grace in vain. Now that is actually a really strong warning. It's couched in nice words, but it's a strong warning because what he's saying is by thinking that they can pick and choose what to believe, they actually risk losing the grace of God that they've come to learn of in the gospel. And so it's a strong warning, but it's one that not only the Corinthians needed to hear, we need to hear it today, especially in the world, the relativistic world we live in, because we can all, even as Christians, if you're a Christian this morning, we can all tend towards a type of relativism in our lives when we think we can pick and choose what truths from the Bible we want to listen to and what we want to ignore. And we do it more than we think. We do it more than we realize. Reading the passages that make us comfortable, avoiding the ones that make us uncomfortable, picking and choosing what of the truths in the

[4 : 35] Bible are the things we're going to remember and take on board so that our lifestyle is not too threatened. And so in this passage this morning, we learn three things that each of us need to realize to make sure that doesn't happen, to make sure that we don't get caught up in relativism. And so let's see what they are. Three things we need to realize. Firstly, we need to realize there is only one way to be part of the new creation. There is only one way to be part of the new creation. So Paul starts here by saying these words from verse one, as God's co-workers, we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.

For he says, in the time of my favor, I heard you and in the day of salvation, I helped you. I tell you now is the time of God's favor. Now is the day of salvation. Okay, so what is Paul saying here? Let's try to look into that a bit and see what it's saying. So he quotes in verse two from the prophet Isaiah. And if you were particularly awake this morning, you would have realized it was the passage that Michiel read for us earlier.

But it's a quote that isn't quite saying what we think it's saying. You see, we think when we read those words in verse two, in the time of my favor, I heard you in the day of salvation, I helped you. We think when we read that God's talking to us here, because, well, we think everything's about us, don't we? But he's actually not. In this part of Isaiah, he's talking to someone called the servant. And that is a mysterious individual who God was preparing to carry out his salvation plan on earth, to give people a way to eternal life, to give people access to a new creation that is coming. And it's, as I said, that's a mysterious figure, the servant figure in Isaiah. And we read on, we get to Isaiah 53, and we realize that the servant actually gives his life for some reason, in order to make God's salvation possible.

And then we carry on reading the Bible, we get to the Gospels, we realize, wow, the servant is actually none other than Jesus Christ, who made that salvation possible, who opened the way to a perfect, restored new creation in the presence of God by dying on the cross for our sins, so that we don't have to be punished for them. And that is the central heart of the Bible's story. And the whole Bible, by the way, is one big story. It's not disassociated books. It's all one big story of God's dealings with humanity and the way God has chosen to save us and restore this world and make us a part of that if we believe in Jesus through his death on the cross. And so, in this part of Isaiah, God is not talking to us, God is talking to the servant, his son, Jesus. But now what's interesting is when Paul the apostle quotes this, whenever he seems to quote about the servant in Isaiah, and there's a few passages in Isaiah that talk about the servant, when Paul quotes them, he also applies those passages not just to

Jesus, but to himself as an apostle of Jesus. And that is interesting. And so, we see that if you're taking notes, you can look at Acts 13, 47 at home in your own time or in growth groups.

[7 : 55] But there, we see an example of Paul applying the role of the servant in Isaiah to himself as he continues the mission of Jesus. After the ascension of Jesus, Paul and the other apostles continue that mission. And so, the point is, where am I going with all this? The point is what Paul's saying here in 2 Corinthians is that God's promise in Isaiah to hear and to help his servant, to carry out his mission, is still being fulfilled in Paul's ministry. And then, what he does in the rest of the passage, verse 3 to 10, is he gives examples of how God has proven to be with Paul and help Paul and the other apostles on their mission. But you see the implication of that. Paul's saying, Isaiah was talking about us, the apostles. The implication, the reason why he's saying this is to show the Corinthians that his ministry is all part of God's plan. That he and the other apostles, even though the Corinthians are kind of looking at them skew, are central in what God is doing in this world. Paul and the apostles are the instruments God is using to carry out his salvation plan that he's been planning in history. And so, to ignore them and their message is actually to reject God's offer of salvation. That, you know, Paul is saying something pretty important here. He's saying to ignore the words of the apostles is actually to turn our back and to reject God himself and his offer of salvation. So, you know, for us, that's what I meant for the Corinthians. But for us, to ignore their words recorded for us in scripture, or to think that we can pick and choose what to listen to, that is actually rejecting God. That is saying to God that we don't really want to listen to what he's revealed to us. Imagine a, you know, a friend sent you a letter and you decided only to read certain sentences of that letter and then think that you know what your friend is saying to you, obviously you don't do that. You read the whole letter. It's the same with the revelation God has given us through his prophets and apostles. We read it in its entirety. We don't pick and choose what we want to suit our lives. That's not how it works. And so that's what Paul is saying about himself.

He's saying if you, if you pick and choose or reject his message, then there is no other way to be saved. So again, using the idea of an ambassador in wartime, which is the illustration Paul used in the last passage. If an ambassador comes into a hostile country with peace terms from a country they're at war with, right? And he brings these peace terms way, a way in which if you follow these instructions, you can create peace with your enemy. If that ambassador comes and you ignore him, or worse, you kill him, which happened to many ambassadors in wars. I get into a habit of quoting from a gladiator. But there's the scene right at the beginning where the Romans send an ambassador on a horse to the, what are they, the goths or whatever. And then they wait for him and he comes back riding on his horse, but minus a head. It's pretty gross, but that's the idea. You know, the ambassador, they rejected the peace terms, obviously that's the point. And if, if you ignore the ambassador's peace terms or you kill the ambassador, then what you have done is you have destroyed any chance you once had at peace. And Paul is saying the same thing about his message that is recorded for us here in scripture as an ambassador sent from God and commissioned by the

Lord Jesus Christ himself. If you ignore his message, if you ignore the claims of the gospel on your life, then there is no other way to have peace with God. There is no other way to be saved.

There is no other way to avoid hell. And there is no other way to be part of the new creation other than the peace terms that God has laid out in the Bible. Now, as Christians, if you're a Christian this morning, that's not news to you. I think we know that. We know that there is no other way to salvation but through the terms God has laid out in his word. And yet we live in a world which is increasingly opposed to the idea that there can only be one way. And you may have come across it in conversations you've had with people at work or friends or family members. People will tell you, but there can't only be one way to God. Why would he do that? You know, there's many ways, many paths to get to God.

Have you heard that? I mean, watch Oprah and watch other popular speakers and they will be, you know, that people listen to you and that's the kind of things they'll be saying.

[12 : 56] And you can even get into trouble these days for saying that Jesus is the only way. I'm not joking. Just last week, a man was arrested temporarily outside Southgate Tube Station in London, England, which was a once Christian country. And this man was doing nothing more than preaching the gospel.

He wasn't breaking any laws, but the police told him he was guilty for breach of peace because he was saying that Jesus is the only way to be saved. Actually, there's a video. You can look it up. It's online. And I watched the video and it was a very interesting exchange between this guy and the police officers. So the police told him to stop preaching. And then he, he, he said to them, but the people need to hear because Jesus is the only way. And then one cop said, but nobody wants to listen to that. And then he said, you don't want to listen to that. You'll listen when you're dead.

And that's when the cops came out and he was arrested. But it's very interesting that exchange because both the cop and the preacher were right. The preacher was right to say, Jesus is the only way.

And the cop was right when he said, no one wants to listen to that. Because it's true. The message of Jesus does breach the peace. It makes people uncomfortable.

If Jesus were in England today, he would probably be arrested for breach of peace, which is ironic. If you think about it, because he is the only way you can have any real peace in your life, because he is the only way you can have peace with God, because he is the only person who has died for your sins. And that's why Paul is so adamant that the Corinthians listened to his message and not anyone else's because nobody, no, no, no other philosophy, nobody else's teaching or philosophy will give you a way to be saved, will give you a way to the new creation, no matter how attractive or helpful it might be for your life. Now, if it's not the teaching that the prophets and the apostles laid down that is in scripture, then it's no good for eternity. Paul's message, the gospel that he is bringing to these Corinthians is the only way God has chosen to make peace with you and me and sinful humanity. And what's more, it's a limited time offer. Verse two, at the end, I tell you now is the time of God's favor. Now is the day of salvation. This period in history, since the death and resurrection of

[15 : 37] Christ and before the return of Christ, this chapter in history is the only time God is making that offer to you and it will expire when Jesus comes back and it will be too late. And that could be tomorrow.

Which is why I say again, if you haven't taken God's peace offer by trusting in Jesus and handing over your life back to its rightful owner, the Lord Jesus Christ, don't wait another day. Let today be the day of salvation for you. I'm conducting a funeral on Thursday, which is just another reminder that none of us know when our day is going to come. And so you've got to take the gospel seriously while you still can, while you still have the ability to respond to it, because it's the only way you can be saved from the eternal consequences of your sins in hell. And I say that with grave seriousness.

And that's the first thing we need to realize if we're not going to be caught up in the world's relativism. We need to realize there is only one way to salvation. God has made it clear, but you need to respond to it. Secondly, the second thing we need to realize is that even if you've found that way, you can lose it. Even if you've found that way, you can lose it. Now it sounds quite shocking. But look again at what Paul says to these Corinthians who have already heard the gospel.

Keep in mind, verse 1. He says, we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. Now what does he mean by that? What does it mean to receive God's grace in vain? Well, he's talking about people who have heard the message of the gospel, who have received God's peace offer, but they turn away from it.

They don't respond to it. It has no lasting effect for them. And that's what the word in vain means, no lasting effect. You see, it's possible for you to hear the gospel. It's possible for you to come to church and hear the gospel time and time again, day in and day out. And it's possible for you to even agree with the gospel and say, yes, that makes sense. That's right. I believe that that is, you know, agreeable, intellectually. And it's possible for you to say that you believe it, and yet for it to have no lasting effect in your life, for it to be in vain. Or to put it another way, just because you found the way to eternal life doesn't mean you're actually walking on it. I'll say that again. Just because you found the way to eternal life and you hear it and you come to church does not mean you're walking on the way to eternal life. And if you're not walking on it, you will eventually walk away from it. I've seen it over and over again. People who come to church and they sit and they listen for years and then suddenly they stop and they go, you know, that's not for me. And the reason was because while they were coming to church, while they were exposed to the way to salvation, they were never walking on it. They were never living a life consistent with it. And that's what Paul is teaching. But it's not just Paul who teaches this. Jesus himself warns about it. So in his famous parable of the sower, he talks about those who I quote from Matthew 13, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. Is that you this morning? Have you heard the word? And if you received it with joy, we'll be warned because Jesus goes on. But since they have no root, they last only a short time when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Jesus said that is possible.

[19 : 31] And in Matthew 7, 21, he says, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven. So Paul teaches it. Jesus teaches it. It is a true warning that we need to take on board. And now this is not saying that when you're truly saved, you can lose that salvation. Because the Bible also teaches that those who are truly saved do not lose their salvation. God grants them perseverance. What it's saying though, what these warnings are saying is that just by calling yourself a Christian doesn't mean that you're truly saved. It's saying those who fall away eventually showed that they were never truly saved in the first place. And so the question, each, every single one of us must ask, no matter how long you've been calling yourself a Christian, no matter how long you've been going to church, no matter what kind of service you do in the local church, every single one of us, including myself, must ask, how can I make sure that I am walking on the way of salvation that God has made open? How can I make sure I'm not just believing in vain, but then I'm actually living the life God has called me to live? Well, the answer to that is right at the end of this passage. And the third thing and final thing we need to realize this morning, and that is that in order not to lose the way, realize you need to take your Bible seriously. You need to take your Bible seriously. Look at verse 11 to 13 and I'll show you where I get that from. So this is at the end of the passage. Paul says this, we have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us as a fair exchange. I speak as to my children, open wide your hearts also. Okay, so Paul has, for a few chapters, been showing how he's legitimately sent by God. He is the mouthpiece of God as an apostle to the Corinthians, God's ambassador with God's message of peace. And we've just seen at the beginning of this passage that he warns the Corinthians that they're in danger of falling away if they don't take his message seriously, if they don't take it on board. And so here at the end, he tells them how to make sure that they are taking it on board. How to make sure that they are taking his message seriously. And that is, he says, they must open wide their hearts to him. They must not withhold their affection for him. Now you think it would be enough to say they must just listen to him.

But he goes further here and he says they need to actually have affection for him, which is strange, but he's saying they need to love him. They need to be attracted to him. And it's not out of some misplaced sense of vanity that he's saying that. He's not saying that they need to be attracted to his status or his strength or his attractiveness as a person, but as a messenger of God, they need to be attracted to that. They need to have affection for that. The truth he brings needs to engage not just their minds, but their hearts, their affections. It needs to move them. Otherwise they won't stick it out.

They won't last. They won't persevere because you know what? People will always eventually gravitate towards what they love the most. And if it's not God and his word, it'll be something in the world.

And while that might be nice, the thing that you love the most in the world, while it might be attractive and while that might be the thing that you give your time and attention to, it can't save you for eternity. And so it's misplaced. As Thomas Cranmer, the great father of Anglicanism, put it, whatever the heart loves, whatever the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies.

Whatever you truly love is what you will choose to pursue and your mind will tell you that it's fine. And so Paul knows unless these people he's writing to love him, feel affection towards him as God's messenger more than their affection for the world and the false gospels they're hearing, unless they do that, well then they'll always drift back to what they love more. He knows that.

[24 : 06] And so he appeals for their love, not just their attention. He's fighting for their affection so that they don't end up having received the gospel in vain. Well, in the same way, when we come to church, when we open the word, God is fighting for your affection and mine to love him and to love his word because his word is the means by which he makes relationship with him possible. And so our affection needs to be not just for God and in songs of worship, but for his word as well, because the word is the way we learn about him and it's the way we connect with him. Do you have affection for that word? I remember when I fell in love with Jean, my wife. We were in different countries at that point for almost a year. She was in the United States and I was in London. And so it was back in the day when you still wrote letters. I know it seems like really far removed and we didn't even have

WhatsApp. It was just emails. We could email each other, but we wrote each other letters. It was special to get a letter. And I remember, I remember those days when I arrived home from work in my little little flat in London and there waiting for me was a letter from the United States. And I remember how excited I got and I would scoop that up and run straight up to my room, ignoring my housemates so that I could open it up and read it five times over and just absorb the words that Jean wrote to me.

Because I love Jean, I love the words she wrote as well. I had affection. It excited me to read them because of my relationship with her. So let me ask you, is that your attitude towards the word of God?

Do you love it? Do you regularly grab it up, ignoring the world around you for a while so that you can spend time reading it and being absorbed in it? And do you seek to study it with other Christians when you get the opportunity? In other words, is the Bible a primary feature of your life? Because if not, then you probably don't love it enough. And if you don't love God's word, how can you really say that you love God? No, if we call ourselves believers, we need to make sure that our love for the word is greater than our love for the world. Because if not, the very real danger is that we too will have received God's grace in vain. And let that not be said for any of us. Let's pray.

Lord, we do ask that you would help us this morning and as we go into a new week, to take these words on board, to not pick and choose the comfortable things and ignore the uncomfortable things. Help us, Lord, to take this uncomfortable truth on board that we might be calling ourselves Christians and yet we might still receive the grace of you in vain. And so help us, Lord, to take this on board and help us to love you and to love your word so that we spend our time and we make a habit of being absorbed in it so that we can grow closer to you, that we can truly live the way you've called us to live. We pray for this in Jesus' name. Amen.