

Saints and Sinners: An Introduction to 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 1:1-9
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We begin with a tale of two churches.

Church number one has much to be proud of. They are influential in their community, growing, and filled with people wholeheartedly devoted to obeying God's laws. Despite the fact that they live in a largely anti-Christian region, they have somehow managed to retain a place of prominence in their community, and while other churches are despised, this church is loved and embraced by all - even by non-Christians. Their worship is decent and orderly. Their pastor has just finished an enormously popular teaching series entitled, "Live Like Jesus: A Revolutionary Summons to Radical Obedience." It is quite clear that this pastor, and this church, have much to boast in concerning what they have accomplished.

Church number two has nothing to be proud of. There is serious division in the church - arguments over which popular Christian leaders should be followed. Their division manifests itself during their worship times. Their worship is disorderly and confusing at best. Some believers are suing other believers in secular courts. They are unable to resolve simple differences between themselves. There is gross sexual immorality, this church even taking some pride in their tolerance to sexual license. This church has failed to understand the fundamentals of marriage. They are constantly tempted toward idolatry. Their abuse of certain spiritual gifts only adds to their problems. Furthermore, some are even denying the central Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In short, they are just barely hanging on to the gospel.

Now, you have just moved to town. These are the only two church options. Where will you worship?

I hope you would choose church number two.

Both churches reflect the actual situations of two distinct churches that the apostle Paul planted. The first church mirrors what was happening in the churches of Galatia. They were morally upright. They loved God's law. They boasted in their obedience. But they had lost the gospel, and in losing the gospel they lost everything.

When Paul writes to the Galatian church he writes the most stinging rebuke of all his letters. He offers no thanksgiving for them. He does not rejoice over them. He does not celebrate their growth in Christ. In place of his typical warm greeting, he brings reproof and admonishment: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ..." (1:6); "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (3:1); "I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain" (4:11); and "You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (5:7).

The second church is the Corinthian church. It is an absolute mess in almost every way imaginable. They were barely hanging on to the gospel, but they were hanging on. In spite of their epic problems, Paul begins his letter to them with remarkable warmth, thanksgiving, and a powerful affirmation of their standing in Christ.

The overarching question that must frame our discussion of these opening verses is this, "How can Paul express such a warm and thankful heart specifically for a church that is in such a terrible mess?"

Think about Paul's situation. One of the major problems the church was having was that they were divided over which leader to follow. Some said they followed Paul, many others rejected Paul in favor of other popular Christian leaders. Yet, in spite of their rejection of Paul, he expresses an enormous gratitude for them. We may ask, "What's wrong with Paul?"

The answer, of course, is that nothing is wrong with Paul. It is just that Paul has a profound understanding of the gospel. So profound, in fact, that he is able to look on this church that is in such a mess, so full of sin, and see the truth about them. In spite of their manifold problems, God has saved them, God is sanctifying them, and God will bring to completion the work he began in them through Christ. Paul sees this, so he thanks God for them.

Let's focus on three things in particular that Paul sees and understands about the Corinthian church that enables him to offer thanksgiving for them, in spite of all their problems.

Evidence of God's Saving Grace

First, Paul sees evidence of God's saving grace among them. In v. 4, Paul says, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus...."

Paul thanks God because God's grace was evident among them. Paul is not blind to their problems. He'll deal with their problems very thoroughly in the rest of the letter. Paul is not being overly optimistic. He is not being naïve in his joy and gratitude. Instead, he is being profoundly realistic. He looks at this church with spiritual eyes, sees God's grace at work among them, and he rejoices in it.

Now, what about you? How do you assess Christ's church?

Think back to the tale of two churches. It's hard to actually admit that church number two is in a much better place than church number one, isn't it? It was the first church that was seemingly in order. It was the first church that had decency, morality, and a zeal for God's law. The problem is that our tendency sometimes is to judge Christ's church, the people of God, the person sitting down the pew from me, with worldly eyes, and not with the spiritual eyes that Paul exhibits here.

The Galatian church thought they were doing very well with all their morality and law keeping, but they lived without the gospel of grace. So Paul called their practices a return to the "elementary principles of the world" (Gal. 4:9). That language is important. Paul's meaning is that when you assess yourself primarily through the law and moral goodness, and not the gospel, you are simply returning to the same way of thinking that characterizes all men in all places outside of Christ.

Now friends, we need to understand that every time we interact with other Christians, our sinful tendency is always going to be to return to the "elementary principles of the world," judging one another by our own standards of law and morality. It is in our blood to be judges. We are good at it. It is quite easy to foster a spirit of criticism among ourselves.

But in his opening words to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul shows us a different way forward. Paul looks at the church, not with worldly eyes according to the elementary principles of the world, but with spiritual eyes. And he sees profound evidence of God's grace among them. Thus, his first instinctive response is glad thanksgiving and a warm affirmation of his love for these people.

Friends, how do you look at Christ's church? Do you have the spiritual eyes of Paul? Do you see evidence of God's saving grace among your fellow Christians, and do you rejoice in those things, and thank God for them, and openly affirm God's working among your brothers and sisters?

At our church, God is unquestionably, undoubtedly at work among us. In spite of our sin and pride and everything that is wrong with me and you, the grace of God is here – and it is real. Do you see it? Do you celebrate it? Do you affirm it in the lives of others? Do you find yourself thanking God for one another, just as Paul does for the Corinthians? Paul looked at the Corinthians and sure, he saw the sexual immorality and divisiveness and general confusion within the church, but most significantly he saw God's grace at work among them.

I have read that “the church is kind of like a sausage – it's better to just enjoy the thing and not look to see how it all comes together behind the scenes.”¹ The church can be such an ugly place. When it comes to the church triumphant, we are given the most glorious of pictures – that beautiful bride ready for her husband, Christ. But when it comes to the church militant, the church on earth today, the picture we have is that of the Corinthians. This is what Christ's church looks like now. The struggles of Corinth are our own struggles today.

In the thirteen years I've been in Christian ministry, I've seen some really ugly things: church splits, infidelity and deceit among pastors, cruelty toward other Christians in word and action. You've seen ugly things too. But it is precisely here, in the midst of the frequent ugliness and difficulties of church life, that we are given the most profound opportunity to magnify the gospel of God's grace. And we do that by becoming like Paul, looking at the church with spiritual eyes.

Paul was not being naïve. He was being realistic. As he grasped the reality of God's grace among the Corinthians, he magnified the gospel at work in their lives. May we do likewise.

The Corinthians Lack Nothing

Second, Paul also thanks God for the Corinthians and rejoices over them because they lack nothing for their growth and sanctification. He writes, “in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 5-8).

In spite of their current situation, Paul affirms that they lack nothing for their growth and sanctification. The grace they have received for salvation is also grace enough for them to grow and to do the will of God.

Paul doesn't offer them a whole new plan of growth. He doesn't suggest that the gospel isn't working and that they need to try something completely different, or in

addition to the gospel. Paul doesn't offer them the latest growth fad or the newest innovation in Christian spirituality. Instead, Paul simply acknowledges that once they have heard and received the gospel, they literally have been given everything they need for growth and sanctification.

Paul celebrates the fullness of what they have in Christ. They have been given spiritual gifts. They have been enriched in all speech and knowledge. And these gifts are sufficient, so Paul is confident that God will sustain the Corinthians until the very end. God does not leave his children ill equipped for life and growth.

Again, we need to be reminded to assess the gifts God has given his church through spiritual eyes. Our constant temptation is to make our assessment with worldly eyes, to focus on things such as the *ABC's* of Christianity: attendance, buildings, and cash. We think, if only we had more people, a better building, or more cash, then we could really do the work of the church, then we could grow spiritually, then we could really see God at work. But these are worldly assessments. We must remember, God always grants his church everything it needs to be sustained to the end and counted guiltless on the day of Christ.

God Is Faithful

Third, Paul offers glad thanksgiving for the Corinthians because God is faithful. He says, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 9).

Paul had absolutely no reason to trust the Corinthians any farther than he could throw them. They didn't trust him. They didn't trust one another. When left to themselves, they made quite a mess of things in relatively short order. There are real reasons not to trust one another, even in the church. We will, inevitably, let one another down – sometimes we will profoundly let one another down.

Paul had no reason to trust the Corinthians. Instead, he trusted God.

In v. 9, Paul quite simply grounds all of his thanksgiving and praise to God for the Corinthians in these three words, "God is faithful." In other words, God will not let us down. He will do what he promises. He will be true to his word. He is reliable and sure. He is faithful. Paul's great confidence that this church will indeed be sanctified and glorified on the day of Christ is grounded in the faithfulness of God. We must likewise trust God.

This is, in fact, how the church works. Not that we trust one another – but that we trust ultimately in God's faithfulness. Everything the church does works, not because of you and me, but because of God. Although the church is more often like a sausage than a sweet roll, although church life is often ugly, although the Corinthian problems are still our own today, God is faithful, and his grace and gifts are abundantly evident among us even today.

Love Your Church

In light of Paul's warm thanksgiving and glad praise to God for the Corinthian church, we likewise need to learn to see Christ's church with those same spiritual eyes.

Here is your challenge. Go to church faithfully. Love the church. Love your neighbor in the church. Serve the church. Do your nursery duty faithfully. Volunteer to mow the lawn. Be thankful for those who serve unseen. Pray for others. Pray faithfully for the public requests of the church. Obey your leaders. Be zealous to grow. Invite your friends and neighbors. Come hungry to learn from God's word. Come prepared to be challenged and broken by God's law – and built up and established by the gospel. Encourage one another in love. Think little of yourself and much of others. When sin arises, use that as an opportunity to magnify the gospel and build up Christ's church.

Like Paul, be thankful for the church – even your church! Look upon her with the glorious lens of the gospel and see for yourself that God really is faithful.

¹ Kevin DeYoung & Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 211.