

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 - Grace

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[0 : 00] Good morning. We're going to read in the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 1 to 9.

! I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

For in him you have been enriched in every way, with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge.

God does confirming our testimony about Christ among you.

Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is faithful. Who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Amen. Please join me in a word of prayer.

[1 : 34] Father, you say in your word that the unfolding of your word gives light.

We pray now that as we think together about the beginning of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, that you would shed light in our hearts.

That we might see you more clearly. That we might see ourselves and our world more clearly. And that we might see the grace and glory of your Son, Jesus, more clearly.

So that we might trust him and love him and follow him all our days. Please help me to preach.

Please give us ears to hear as your word goes forth.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, greetings again from Franconia Baptist Church in Northern Virginia. We pray for all of you often.

[2 : 42] It is a joy to sing God's praises with you. Let me just start by telling you something that surely you know. And that is that God has given you a wonderful gift in Steve, your pastor.

Steve is a dear friend of mine. I worked with him from 2016 to 2018. I have learned so much from Steve about ministry, about following Jesus.

He was really one of the first people to help me learn to preach. So the next 30 minutes are his fault. Steve loves God's word. One of the passages I pray for myself all the time is from 1 Timothy chapter 2, where Paul tells Timothy to be diligent, to work hard, to show himself approved, as he handles accurately God's precious word of truth.

And Steve is that kind of man. He loves God's precious word of truth, and he spends his life laboring to handle it accurately for the good of God's people. One of the verses that we pray for ourselves as elders at Franconia Baptist Church is from 1 Peter chapter 5, where Peter says that we ought to shepherd the flock of God, which Jesus bought with his blood, like Jesus, humbly and lovingly and gently.

And that is the kind of pastor that God has given you in Steve. So I thank God for him, and I know you do as well. Well, it's a joy to visit another healthy church in another part of the globe.

[4 : 13] Our sermon text this morning was written to perhaps a significantly less healthy church. 1 Corinthians, and by the way, we say 1 Corinthians.

I know you say 1 Corinthians. So pardon me for saying 1 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians was written to the church in Corinth by the Apostle Paul in 53 or 54 AD.

Let me first tell you the story of Paul's relationship with this church in Corinth, leading up to the writing of this letter. So in Paul's day, Corinth was an extremely wealthy and an extremely worldly city.

Corinth sat at the intersection of two trade routes, one a land trade route and two a sea trade route. And so there was a lot of money in Corinth.

And as a result, there were a lot of people in Corinth because people tend to flock to money. Sexual immorality was extremely prevalent in Corinth.

[5 : 17] One of the famous Greek writers a few hundred years before Paul had coined the term to Corinthize, which is a way of saying to commit fornication. So Corinth was an extremely worldly, pagan, sexually immoral city.

But around 50 or 51 AD, about 20 years after the Lord Jesus died and rose, the Apostle Paul brought to Corinth the good news about God's son Jesus, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that he died to atone for the sins of all who would trust in him, to wash their sins away by his precious blood, that he rose from the dead three days later in victory over sin and death, and that he will share his righteousness and his eternal life with all who will trust in him.

And Paul brought that message to Corinth. And when he did, many of the Corinthians believed. They turned from sin and idolatry and they trusted in God's son Jesus.

And Paul says that they were washed by his blood. They were sanctified or made holy by their union with him. They were justified. They were declared righteous because of what Jesus had done for them.

The Apostle Paul stayed in the city of Corinth for about a year and a half, preaching and nurturing this infant church, helping them to learn what it means to follow Jesus, now that they've been united to him.

[7 : 00] And about a year and a half after he came, Paul leaves to continue to spread the gospel in other places. Around 52 AD, Paul leaves Corinth. And in Paul's absence, the church in Corinth becomes what theologians like to call a hot mess.

The church begins to fracture. There are divisions. Certain sects form in the church more devoted to their sort of favorite personal leaders than to Jesus.

There's lots of quarreling in the church. Some of the members are suing each other over petty and insignificant matters. Some of the members are imitating the pagan, sexually immoral practices that they had left behind.

They're visiting prostitutes. Many in Corinth are flirting with serious doctrinal errors. Some of them seem to be leaning toward a denial of the resurrection, which is pretty important in Christian doctrine.

Their worship services are a mess. People see corporate worship as a time to sort of big up themselves, to highlight their own gifts and prominence, rather than to build up the body of Christ.

[8 : 12] The Lord's Supper. Paul says that when the church gathers to take the Lord's Supper, some leave hungry, even though it was a potluck meal, and some leave drunk. And in the midst of all of this mess, somehow the Corinthians are becoming terribly proud.

Their view of themselves is that they're an excellent church. They're a next-level church. Some of them are gifted orators. Many of them are incredibly educated and knowledgeable.

So they think they're great. Well, in 53 or 54 AD, after Paul gets a report of how things are going in Corinth, Paul sits down to write this letter, 1 Corinthians or 1 Corinthians.

And you can see that Paul is facing a tricky task, a complex task. Paul needs to unify this divided church. He needs to challenge their pride.

He needs to warn them against the sin and the error that they are playing with. He needs to help them get their act together when they gather as a church.

[9 : 22] He needs to maintain his relationship with them, and he needs to help them start growing again. He needs to encourage them to continue to conform to the image of Jesus and to follow him.

Well, if you are the Apostle Paul sitting down to write that letter, I wonder how you would begin. What do you say first as you start that tricky letter that's going to need to contain some stinging rebukes?

How do you start? What do you say first to set up well for everything else that follows? The heart of this passage, which begins Paul's letter, is there in verse 4.

This is how Paul starts his letter to the Corinthian church. Look there in verse 4. I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

There's a lot going on in this passage. In a moment, we'll walk through these verses, but the big picture is that Paul begins his letter to the Corinthian church by thanking God for his grace given to them in Christ Jesus.

[10 : 52] Paul begins by thanking God for his grace to the messy Corinthian church. Let's take just a few minutes now and walk through the details of this text.

So there in verse 1, Paul introduces himself as an apostle. That is to say, he is an authorized representative of Jesus.

Jesus has commissioned Paul to speak his own words to his people. So Paul's not just writing with some tips and ideas. He's writing the very word of God because he is an apostle. Paul mentions Sosthenes there.

Probably Sosthenes is the scribe to whom Paul is dictating. There in verse 2, Paul identifies to whom he's writing. He calls them the church of God in Corinth.

And notice Paul says there in verse 2 that this church has been sanctified or made holy in Jesus Christ. Already this morning, we've sung about God's holy name.

[11:58] What it means for God to be holy is that God is completely pure. There is no sin or evil or falsehood in God. And what's more, God is separate and distinct from the world that he has made.

To put it mildly, God is supremely special. So what Paul means when he says that the Corinthians have been sanctified or made holy is that through Jesus, the Corinthians have been given a special relationship with God.

They belong to him. The Corinthians are God's precious possession. They've been washed and made holy by the blood of Jesus and now they belong to God.

That's what it means that they are sanctified. What a marvelous privilege to belong to God as his own purified, special possession. But notice this privilege of being sanctified.

It doesn't only belong to the Corinthians. Paul says that they've been sanctified there together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

[13:17] Can you see what Paul is doing? Already, already, he is both encouraging and humbling, the Corinthians. He's pointing out that they have this inestimable privilege of belonging to God as his holy people, but lest they get big heads about it, he says, by the way, that's the same privilege that God has given to all of his people everywhere, entirely by grace.

There in verse 3, Paul tells the Corinthians how God feels about them. Friend, do you ever wonder that? How God feels about you?

What his heart in heaven is toward you? Especially when you're a bit of a mess like the Corinthians? Look there in verse 3. Paul says, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christian, if you belong to Jesus, if you've turned from sin and are trusting in him to reconcile you to God, to make you holy, this is God's heart toward you.

Grace and peace. What is grace? Grace is undeserved favor. Grace is free kindness.

[14:40] It is a generous and loving heart attitude of God toward us. That's what grace is. What is peace? Peace is relational harmony.

Peace is when all is well between you and someone you love. A Christian, if you belong to Jesus, God's grace and peace are yours because of Christ.

That's his heart toward you. One full of grace. One desiring peace with you, having made peace with you through Jesus. Verse 3 tells us about God's heart toward the Corinthians.

Verse 4 tells us about Paul's heart toward the Corinthians. Paul has been praying for the Corinthians. He's been pouring out his heart to God about this church that's caused him so much pain and trouble.

What do you think Paul has been praying for the Corinthians? Probably many things, but the first thing, the thing he always prays when he prays for them is to give thanks to God for them.

[15:50] And so he tells them, he says, Corinthians, I'm so thankful for you. Every time I open my mouth in prayer to God, I thank him. I don't thank you, Corinthians, but I thank God for his kindness, his grace to you, the way that he's poured out his favor on you.

All the love that he's shown you in saving you through Jesus and all the work that he's doing in you through his Holy Spirit. I thank God for his grace to you given in Jesus Christ.

Because you have him, because you belong to him. And then in the rest of this passage from verses 5 to 9, Paul unpacks, explains, what the grace of God at work in the Corinthians has looked like.

There in verse 5, Paul says that God's Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sends to live inside all who trust in him, he says that the Holy Spirit has enriched them with gifts, with all speech and knowledge.

Interestingly, later in the letter, Paul will go after the Corinthians for misusing their speech and their knowledge in selfish ways. But here, Paul encourages them, that the Spirit has gifted them.

[17 : 04] He sees that, verse 6, as evidence that the gospel is true. You could look at the Corinthians' lives and the ways that the Spirit was transforming and empowering them and you could see, hey, this message about Jesus is true.

He really died and rose and ascended to heaven and gave these people his Holy Spirit. The Spirit's work in them confirms, Paul says, the truth of the gospel. There in verse 7, Paul says that as a result, because they have the Holy Spirit, they have everything they need as they wait for Jesus to come back and finish their salvation by drawing them to himself as they wait for the appearance of Jesus.

And Paul says in verse 8 that he's very confident that God will keep them standing firm until Jesus comes back, not because the Corinthians are so great, not because they're so stable and solid, but because, verse 9, God is faithful.

God is the one who called them. I'm sure you've heard about that as you've been studying through Romans. God is the one who spoke to them in a way that their hearts could not resist so that they responded to his gospel with faith.

God called them, Paul says, and that's why he's confident that God will keep them standing firm in their faith in Jesus until the very end. Well, a few minutes ago I told you the story of the Corinthian church in all its messiness and everything that I said was true.

[18 : 38] But it's clear that Paul sees a much bigger story going on in the life of the Corinthian church. See, it's not primarily a story about the Corinthians and their problems.

It's not primarily a story about how messy that church is. It's not primarily a story about how gifted that church is. That's what the Corinthians thought the story was about.

When Paul looks at the Corinthians, he sees a story about the grace of God in Christ Jesus at work in sinful people to save and transform him.

The big story in Corinth is not, wow, look at those gifted superstars. It's not, wow, look at those losers. It's, wow, look at the grace of God at work in sinful people through Jesus Christ.

Look at the transforming power of God. Look at the almighty favor of God given to the Corinthians freely, graciously through Jesus.

[19 : 45] Jesus. And so Paul begins this letter to the Corinthians by directing their attention away from themselves and towards God's kindness in Jesus.

And here's the point. Here's the point for you and me. That is where their eyes need to be fixed if they are going to grow. If the Corinthians are going to grow into the mature, godly, holy, unified people that God is calling them to be, their eyes must be fixed, not on their problems, not on their gifts and excellencies, but on God's grace to them in Jesus Christ.

And brothers and sisters, we grow when our eyes are fixed on God's grace in Jesus Christ. That's the takeaway.

we grow as Christians when our attention is riveted on God's grace, his kindness, his favor, his love for us, given to us in Jesus Christ.

If we want to grow in wisdom, in love, in humility, in unity, in holiness, the saving grace of God in Jesus must dominate our attention.

[21 : 07] We need to sing and pray and teach and talk about it. We need to read about and meditate on it day after day. We grow when our eyes are fixed on God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Let me give you two reasons why that is the case. Two reasons why we grow when our eyes are fixed on God's grace in Jesus. The first is that God's grace humbles our pride.

God's grace in Jesus Christ humbles our pride. Christian, let me tell you a story. It's our story. Once upon a time, we did not love God.

Once upon a time, we lived in rebellion against God. We broke his law when we felt like it. Even when we kept his law outwardly, it was not because we loved God.

And right in the middle of us not loving God, God loved us. And he gave his son Jesus to die and rise to save us.

[22 : 10] He did what he did for the Corinthians for us. He called us into fellowship with his son. He sent his spirit to open our eyes and give us faith. And now by the grace of God, we too are sanctified.

We are holy. We are in a special relationship with Jesus. And ever since our conversion, we're still not that good at loving God, at obeying him, at living holy lives.

Even as a Christian, we are so often, I am so often selfish and insensitive and proud and foolish and moody. We are far often, far more like the Corinthians than we would like to admit. And yet again and again and again, God showers his grace, his forgiveness, his favor on us through Jesus. and we know that we'll make it to the end because God, who called us, is faithful to keep us in fellowship with his son, Jesus.

Let me tell you, when I remember that that's my story, it's really hard to be proud. It's really hard to think too highly or too much or too often of myself.

[23 : 25] See, like the Corinthians, so many of my problems stem from my pride. The reason I quarrel with people is my pride.

The reason I get moody is because of my pride. I think I'm not getting what I deserve. The reason I am discontent is because of my pride. The reason that I am selfish toward others is because of my pride.

But when I fix my eyes on God's grace toward me in Jesus Christ, my pride is leveled. It's humbled because I see what I deserve in the cross and I see what I've been given in the resurrection.

God's grace humbles our pride. Let me give you a second reason that we grow when our eyes are fixed on God's grace in Jesus Christ.

God's grace guards us from despair. God's grace guards us from despair. I said earlier that in this letter, Paul will need to deliver some hard-hitting rebukes in this letter.

[24 : 33] And he does. I read it through. You'll see he calls them spiritual infants. At one point, he just tells them point blank. He says, you are arrogant. This is my favorite.

In chapter 15, he says, wake up from your drunken stupor as is right and do not go on sinning. If they didn't get the message, he follows that up by saying, I say this to your shame.

He says, you ought to feel bad about this, Paul says. And brothers and sisters, there will be times in our lives, there are times in my life when we need rebuke from God's word, from other brothers or sisters.

Sometimes we will need reproof. We will need to be told what you're doing is wrong. That was wrong. That was foolish. That was selfish. Sometimes we'll need to hear that.

And I don't know about you, but sometimes when I am rebuked or reproved, I start to interpret that reproof as condemnation. Someone is reproving me, and I quickly interpret that as condemnation.

[25 : 44] When I hear, hey, what you did was not good, I instead understand, I am not okay. And so I slide toward despair, that I'm not okay.

And when I respond to rebuke with despair, that's actually the enemy of my growth. Despair is actually the enemy of my growth, because if rebuke leads me to despair, I will not want to hear rebuke.

I will be defensive. I will make it my habit to focus on others' flaws instead of my own. And what's more, we don't really function very well when we feel condemned.

I don't know about you, but if you feel like you're under God's condemnation, it can feel really hard to love God, even though his condemnation is just. And so if we want to grow, we need to fix our eyes on God's grace, on the reality that even though we are works in progress, even though much sin and corruption and fault remains in us, we are loved.

God does not reject us. We remain sanctified. We remain God's special holy possession. He continues to pour his favor on us and to live at peace with us.

[27 : 01] When we know that, that's when we have the security to hear the rebuke that we need because we know that we're not being condemned.

We know that as Proverbs says, God's discipline for us comes from his love and so we'll be able to grow. God's grace humbles our pride and guards us from despair.

That's why we need to fix our eyes on how gracious he has been to us through Jesus if we are to grow. Maybe the best way that we can apply this passage is to do just what we'll do in a few minutes which is to sing about the grace of God given to us in Jesus Christ to remind ourselves that God is for us that he is for us with his almighty favor because of Jesus.

Before we close, there's just one final way that we ought to apply the text. There's one way that we can help one another fix our eyes on God's grace in Jesus Christ and that is that we can learn to encourage one another and we can learn to encourage one another.

Christian, the way that you treat one another ought to reflect the way that God has treated you in Jesus.

[28 : 29] See, the Corinthians must have known on some level that they were kind of the problem church. They must have sensed the growing tension in their relationship with Paul.

How would they have felt when they opened this letter and the first lines are lines of kindness, lines of encouragement, lines of grace and favor?

They would have seen in Paul's encouragement a reflection of God's kindness. Christian, do you want to display God's grace to others?

Learn to be an encourager. Don't be a flatterer. Don't say things that are not true. Don't refuse also to say hard things, but learn to see the grace of God at work in your brothers and sisters, and truly and genuinely to encourage them, to point out God's grace at work in others.

From 2016 to 2018, I worked for Steve at a church in Liverpool. And at the end of my time there, after two years of working for Steve when I was 21 to 23, Steve called me up in front of the church, and he did not tell the story of how I slept through preparing for an important evangelistic event.

[29 : 59] He did not tell the story of how I accidentally dropped the church teapot lid into the River Mersey. He did not bring me up in front of the church and say, David is a 23-year-old who thinks that he knows quite a lot more than he does, which he could have said.

He said, David, you've done a good job. We thank God for his grace at work in you and for the way that he's blessed us through you. And that's a small thing.

It's a small thing. But here's why it matters. That is what Jesus Christ is like. Brothers and sisters, one day we will stand before the judgment seat of Jesus and we will give an account for all our thoughts, all our words, and all our deeds.

And because of his own grace, Jesus will cover and forgive all our sins.

And because of his grace, he will say to people like you and people like me, well done, good and faithful servant.

[31 : 12] And he will get the glory for his grace to us and in us. Brothers and sisters, we grow when our eyes are fixed on that grace.

Let me pray before we sing. Father, thank you for your grace to us in Christ Jesus that through his death and resurrection we are sanctified, we are yours forever.

Thank you, Lord, that we can be certain that you will hold us fast, keep us standing firm in Christ until the day he is revealed, until he comes again. Father, we pray that each one of us, day after day, would rivet our attention on the grace that you have poured out on us through Jesus, that your grace would humble us out of our pride as we remember how good you've been to us in spite of our sins, and that your grace would guard us from despair so that even as we see sin remaining in us, we are secure in your love.

Would we pray that we would reflect your own grace to one another in the way that we celebrate your grace in each other's lives. Lord, give us joy now as we sing of your kindness.

In Jesus' name, amen.