

Epiphany 2 2023

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*Exodus 12:21–28, Psalm 40, 1 Corinthians 1:1–9, John 1:29–4*

Corinth is a town on the rise. People from all across the empire have come to work, trade, make money, and climb to a higher status. Corinth is a city on the move. When Paul proclaims the gospel there, people readily respond and soon a burgeoning church is also on the move. The church in some ways reflects the city and all the challenges in Corinth are in the church. People are competing for spiritual status. There are tensions between the poor and the rich, between various small groups, plus the community as a whole is turning a blind eye to some extreme impropriety. This same group of people has begun to think that they have passed up Paul spiritually.

Paul hears a bit of what is going on, and he decides to write them a pastoral letter. Though he will directly confront some of the issues at the church, Paul opens with mercy and grace. His opening words give us some insight into how Paul views the transformation of the person.

What does he say?

*Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:1–9)*

He opens with Jesus Christ, ends with Jesus Christ and speaks of Jesus Christ all throughout. As St. John Chrysostom says, “Nowhere in any other epistle does the name of Christ occur so continuously in a few verses; by means of it he [Paul] weaves together the whole ... not by chance or unwittingly....” The transformation of the person is rooted in Jesus Christ. He begins the work and he will carry it to completion on the day of the Lord.

I want to highlight a few words in these verses. One of the first words that stands out is to be “called.”

“Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” (1 Corinthians 1:1–2).

Paul is called to be an apostle and the Christians at Corinth are “called to be saints.” Our faith is rooted in the gracious call of God. He has called us into life and called us to grow up into Christ, to become living witnesses of Christ. In spite of our flaws and failures, His call remains. As Isaiah sings,

Thank God that His Word never fails. In one sense, our whole life is a response to His call. Every morning we awake to His call. When He calls us, He gives us the power to respond to His call. Thus we hear Paul’s next two key words “grace and peace.”

Even as He is writing to bring correction, Paul is overwhelming His hearers with blessing. This is a trinitarian blessing. “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:3) This blessing from the Father and the Son is realized in God’s people through the Holy Spirit. This word of grace captures the spirit of this whole letter. It’s all grace. It’s call the gracious gift of God’s love being poured in and upon the Corinthians and upon us as well. As a people who have known the goodness and grace of God, we rejoice in the subsequent blessing of peace, of shalom. Every Sunday we rehearse the promise of peace with God but also peace with one another. In a world so often given to strife, we are a people of peace rooted in the grace of God.

Now Paul gives thanks for these people who are currently opposing Him, who are divided and who are not living into their calling. Paul’s first and foremost response to them is thanksgiving. “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus... (1 Corinthians 1:4). When Paul shared the Gospel in Corinth, these people responded in and through the grace of God. The whole of our Christian life is grace, grace, grace. I would hope that this opening might help remind us that God has loved us and opened our hearts and heads to His grace.

Even as the Lord pours out mercy and grace, He is giving gifts that serve to build up the body. In verses five and six, Paul gives thanks “that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you” (1 Corinthians 1:5–6). These gifts of speech and knowledge are some of the very areas where the people are creating division. They are speaking against Paul and one another. They are competing with one another as to who has the most knowledge of the Spirit. Paul believes that the Spirit can bring change to the congregation even as he calls the people to repent.

This is an interesting dilemma. The people are already exercising their God-given gifts and yet they are using them in a competitive way with one another. The gifts should function like the outgrowing of God’s love and life. Creation, redemption, grace and peace all flow out of the deep love of God. As He showers His people in gifts, the people are called to pour out those gifts in love to one another and to the world.

Now Paul points us to the revealing of Jesus Christ. I am going to read verses four through nine again so we can hear how these point to that moment when Jesus Christ is fully unveiled in all His glory.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that 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 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. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1Corinthians 1:4–9).

Paul's great hope for the Corinthians is the unveiling of Jesus Christ. He trusts that the Holy Spirit will sustain them until that day and present them guiltless on that day. Now I want to pause over this promised revealing of Jesus Christ in the great Day of the Lord. This is a singular event that will mark the end of this age. At the same time, Paul speaks of this revealing in a slightly different way in 2 Corinthians 3.

He writes,

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:17–4:1).

Here Paul sees a gradual transformation: from glory to glory. We are being transformed into the glory the Lord as we behold the glory of our Lord. Where are we seeing Him? In mystical experiences? It is possible, but I don't believe that's the primary experience he is referencing. I would suggest that Paul is suggesting that as we live and serve within the body, we begin seeing glimpses of the goodness and grace of our Lord in one another. These glimpses are changing us. As we pour out our lives in kindness toward one another, we are ministering His grace. Within this competitive, selfish community, Paul is calling these people to live in the reality of love that has already been poured upon them. He sees how this community might be changed, might grow from love to love, from glory to glory. Over time, this little community begins to bear more and more of the image of Jesus to one another and to those beyond the community.

As I think about Paul's words this morning, I think about how easy it can be for us to focus on the faults of others or even our own faults. When this temptation arises let us remember our calling in Christ - We are called by the Lord. Let us focus on His goodness and grace. He has called us to become saints. Let us trust his faithful word, and give thanks for one another even for those who struggling, weary, or even unkind.

In fact, what a great habit to look for Christ specifically in those Christians who may not be exhibiting His love. We give thanks and pray for their transformation evening as we look with hope for the revealing of Jesus Christ. Then something wondrous happens: we begin to see glimpses of His revealing in them. I have seen this happen in my own walk.

Sometimes I when I would be praying, the faces of people who frustrated me would come to mind. I felt compelled by the Spirit to pray for them and to begin giving thanks for all the way His was at work in them. Soon I would begin to see gifts they had that I lacked, and I could genuinely give thanks for who He made and was making them to be.

As I look back over Paul's introduction to this Corinthian letter, I am struck afresh by Chrysostom's observation that Jesus Christ appears again and again in this letter. Even as Paul is writing to a troubled church, his eyes are on Jesus Christ.

We need this habit in church and in culture. Even as we see and hear problems around us, may we keep our heart and minds on Jesus Christ, walking in His way and having hope for His great unveiling.