

Sermon 3: 1 Corinthians 1:4-9: Grateful for Grace

OUTLINE

For their gifts
For their salvation
For their preservation

INTRODUCTION

Imagine these scenarios with me as we prepare ourselves to engage with this next section in 1 Cor. 1:4-9. Have you ever been in a situation where you have to try and find something nice to say about someone but it's hard? You have probably been in that cringe worthy situation where you are at the funeral of a man who divorced his wife; abused his kids and drank himself into the grave, and someone tries to get up and say something good about the guy that isn't a boast about what a great drinker he was. Or think about those situations where you need to give feedback where you want to be both positive and constructive at the same time, you have to juggle not crushing a fragile ego ready to crumble as well as be honest about weaknesses, like when a teacher writes a report on a student. Or think of the difficulty of giving someone who is already too full of themselves a compliment. Or consider how flattery is often used to ingratiate ourselves with someone.

Paul now has to write to a church that is full of sin and weakness and division. Yet as a pastor, and because of the goodness of God to the Corinthians we see a wonderful attitude of gratitude for the grace of God at work in the lives of these Corinthians. Despite their failings and obvious weakness we will witness how he is grateful for them; how he will masterfully draw attention to their weakness while magnifying God's grace. Without any false flattery, and only telling the truth of God's grace never has anyone in obvious sin been so well spoken of; all the while highlighting sin and glorifying God. Paul is no flatterer or false comforter who ignores or excuses sin, he will be very blunt in dealing with sin throughout the letter, but Paul begins with the positives and affirmation as seeks to minister to this needy church. V4-9, '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.' As you look down at these verses you will notice that Paul begins in his usual way with thanksgiving, v4. But unlike so many other places where he is grateful for the church's love like Phil. 1:9, 'And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.' Or for the church's good example, like 1 Thess. 1:7; or good works; or faith. Paul finds the good in them focusing on their gifts; their salvation; and their preservation, all things which God by His grace is doing, not them; these are the three headings that will be leading us. It should also be noted that Paul is still in the introduction, so he is still introducing a number of topics which will be revisited later on. Paul will address speech when dealing with the foolishness of preaching, and tongues and prophecy; he will revisit knowledge when talking about the knowledge about meat offered to idols; he will revisit the testimony of the gospel that he preached among them; he will revisit the matter of judgement

day, especially focusing on the resurrection; and our fellowship in Christ as he will talk about our being one body in Christ.

For their gifts

V4, 'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.' How do you gently rebuke a self-sufficient; self-willed; proud church that thinks it is better than everyone else? Paul does this by reminding the Corinthians of the meaning of grace. Paul you will notice thanks God for what the Corinthians have not them. Paul will repeat this idea again in 1 Cor. 4:7, 'What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?' And again when he says, 1:31, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' Everything you are and have and accomplish that is good is because of God not you. Now there is a blow to the ego, to be reminded that we are needy, that we are creatures, that we were condemned sinners who had no hope without God. This is a truth that puts us all in our place. The word grace we know means unmerited, or rather demerited favor; God's immeasurable goodness in Christ to unimaginably unworthy sinners. His grace is undeserved; His grace is free; His grace is full and is the gift that keeps on giving, because His grace comes to us in Christ where all the benefits of our salvation lie.

If you look down you will see that Paul begins with thankfulness for God's grace, and the rest of the paragraph expands on the various outcomes that result from that grace. There are three conjunctions that mark these listed results. In v5 it begins with the conjunction 'that'. Paul is grateful to God for His grace so 'that' the Corinthians were as a result enriched in spiritual gifts. In v6, the conjunction, 'even as'. Paul is grateful for the grace of God not only for the gifts but 'even as' the apostolic testimony was confirmed by God using that word to save them. The last conjunction is in v7, 'so that.' Paul is grateful that the grace of God has come to the Corinthians so that they lack no gifts; who are sustained by the Jesus they are waiting for; and this grace of God will also sustain them, and make them guiltless on judgement day. He is grateful for the grace of God that gives them gifts; salvation, and preserves them.

Surprisingly Paul is grateful for one of the very things that is causing trouble in the church, v5, 'that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.' The Corinthian church had a peculiar outpouring of God's power, even among the churches of the first century. In speech they had tongues and prophecy; Paul may also be referring to the gifted public speakers among them. Knowledge would include prophecy, words of knowledge and wisdom; as well as the good theology they had around idols. But in both instances, these gifts practiced in a selfish and loveless way has led them to reject Paul; tread upon and cause their brethren to stumble, and to promote themselves and their ideas in God's church.

We learn several things from this. Firstly, Paul is reminding us that any good gift we have is given to us from above. We are not the source of our gifts, therefore we cannot boast and mistreat others out of our sense of self-importance. Secondly, we learn that even in the most sinful Christian there are tremendous spiritual realities that we have to acknowledge and give thanks to God for. Thirdly, there are many gifts of God that get abused but this does not mean the gift is bad. Fourthly, we can take a page out of Paul's book when it comes to addressing the weaknesses of others. Paul begins with the good and not the bad; he begins with the positive and not the negative. Paul recognizes that their

strengths are their weaknesses, and thanks God for these gifts, while he will also instruct them on using them with love to benefit others and not themselves. I find Paul's pastoral approach very instructive. He gives us the proper perspective on our weaknesses as believers and those of others. This can be applied in marriage. Have you ever found yourself clashing with your spouse over something? Maybe they like it tidier for example. Instead of attacking each other by assuming the source of the clash is due to a personality fault, a perfectionist married to a lazy person. Instead, recognize that the person who seeks order probably has an administrative gift which highlights things that are out of order. Their gift is from God, and it is good. Perhaps they are using it selfishly and getting angry and calling you lazy, but instead of attacking them as perfectionists, stop and recognize a good gift being used in a bad way. This helps in parenting. The independence of your young son who seems hardened to advice and who wants to do it his own way. Some will just view this as rebellion that needs to be beaten out of them, even crushing their spirit. But as Christians we recognize that young boys are supposed to want to be independent and rightly attempt to do things on their own on the way to manhood. This instinct is good, but can be in the service of sin when it is unteachable at all, or disrespects parents, or denies the truth. Paul as a pastor could overreact to this church which is taking a good gift and destroying each other with it. Instead he puts their gifts into perspective, he talks about them being from God; he talks about them being for the edification of each other; he talks about the necessity of love in the use of them, etc. Paul is able to begin with praise, and affirmation because of his perspective on their gifts.

For their salvation

V6, 'even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you.' Paul goes on to mention, that God gave them the gifts they have, even as God confirmed the word they heard. There is a subtext here. Paul is going to go on and talk about the message he preached, that message which is foolishness in the eyes of the world, but this is the message that saves us, 1:18, 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' This Corinthian church is addicted to worldly wisdom and the manipulative ways that the celebrity speakers were talking, but Paul here reminds them that they were saved under his preaching.

What we need to note firstly is the content of the message that saved them, 'the testimony about Christ.' The word testimony is literally 'marturion' from which we get our word martyr, this could also be 'witness.' In other words, the apostolic message which is an eye witness account of Jesus Christ as risen from the dead and the promised Messiah is the message that saves. The Corinthian church have become distracted from the gospel going after so called 'wisdom' here Paul is underlining the simplicity of the gospel. The message that saves is a simple one, you are a sinner and Christ is a Savior. He saves you by dying on the cross in payment from your sins. You receive this salvation by trusting in Him and what He has done, by calling on Him to be your Lord and Savior.

Secondly, we see that this message was confirmed among them. It is true that Paul as an apostle did have the accompanying signs of the apostles. The apostles had a special ministry of miracles unique to them because they had a unique role in laying the foundation of the church; and it is their message which is recorded in the Bible. I do not think this is what Paul means by confirmed. What he means is that the word about Jesus as Savior was confirmed among you

by the power of the Holy Spirit converting you to Christ. Or as he says later, 'to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' The Corinthians themselves are the confirmation of the truth they have heard. Their salvation is the proof that the message that they heard is the message from God. And on top of that Paul will later talk about their salvation as a proof of his apostleship which was being doubted by them as well, 9:2, 'If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.'

For their preservation

V7-9, '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.' The idea of God's giving to them graciously is underlined again and again in this section, first Paul is thanking God as the source; secondly Paul talks about grace, which is unearned favor; which is given, not earned. Paul talks about the Corinthians being enriched by God; having the testimony of the word confirmed by God; now he goes on to talk about how they are not lacking because of God; that God will sustain them to the end; that God will enable them to be guiltless; that God is faithful; and God is the one who called them.

Despite the Corinthian church being compromised with sin; being fractured with divisions; and weakened with false teaching, God will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The Christian life is hard and often full of failure and as a result we get discouraged thinking we are not good enough; we will never make it; God must hate me, etc. Paul is about to lay it on thick and so begins by reminding them that God will finish what He has started. Are you discouraged, do you feel like throwing in the towel because you are continually losing against that sin? Paul talks about how we have everything we need for this journey. We have spiritual gifts, we are not lacking in any gift we need to keep us strong and holy and on track. What is interesting about the gifts God's provides for us is that they are supplied to us individually to be applied in service to one another in the church. We together are not lacking in any gift that we need. This is an argument for the importance of you being at church, you have gifts to give and gifts to receive. Part of how God keeps us is by us serving others and being served by them.

Paul then goes on to characterize our time here on this journey, we are waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is not our home, this is not the main event, this is not what it is all about. We are in a waiting room for the most important event to happen. The second coming of Christ to put an end to satan, sin and death. This means that we are not overly invested in this life. We store up our treasures in heaven. This is a reminder to those in Corinth who were denying the resurrection that there is a day coming when the dead will be raised. I also see here an argument against a silent rapture. The day when Jesus comes is a day of revealing, of revelation, the word here is literally 'apocalupsin.'

Paul is someone who lives with the day of the Lord in mind and it changes the way he lives his life, 2 Cor. 5:10-11, 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.' He weaves the reality of that day into the whole letter of the Corinthians as a way to motivate us to live the Christian life. Compare how much

Paul draws on this defining reality to shape the way we live to how much you think about it and allow it to motivate you. Don't follow the wisdom of this world because it is doomed to pass away, 2:6, 'Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.' The workers in God's church will have the integrity of their work tested on judgement day 3:10-15; Church discipline should be applied to save someone's soul on that day 5:5; don't go to court against Christians because we will judge angels 6:2-3; the unrighteous will be judged 6:9-11; don't commit sexual sin against your own body because it will be raised up on the last day, 6:14; the fact that the time is short should transform how we are married or marry at all 7:29-31; this impacts on how Paul runs the race for an imperishable crown 9:25; The Lord's Supper proclaims his death until He comes; God's discipline is applied to those who were abusing the Lord's Supper as discipline to save their souls 11:32; the gifts will come to an end but love will not, 13:8, 12; the whole of chapter 15 talks about the hope of the resurrection after which Paul exhorts, v58, 'Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.' Paul ends the letter with a cry for Jesus to come, 16:22, 'Our Lord, come!'

Having reminded the Corinthians of the certainty of that day, and the way it defines our living now, he goes on to talk about God's sufficient grace giving everything we need for our journey till then, 'who will sustain you to the end.' When we see someone who makes a verbal confession, and even seems to do a great turn around, but who does not endure till the end, that person is like the seed sown among rocks or thorns in the parable of the sower. The sheep of God have the certainty of knowing that nothing can snatch us from the Father's hand. Why do you think Paul says that here? It is because he is about to talk about their failures. And when we come under a crushing sense of guilt because of our failures we automatically think that we are weak; we will not make it; God does not want us. Paul is saying to sinful Christians, yes God takes your sin seriously and as a Father will even discipline you for it, but He is your Father and will sustain His children until the end. It is right that we talk about our sins, but with the hope the gospel gives us.

Paul adds to this, 'guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.' You can really feel Paul frontloading this letter with the wonderful doctrine of justification. Paul is clearly stating here what every Christian will experience on judgement day. It is not a day of fear and trembling for the believer; we live in light of it, but we do not live in fear of it for ourselves but for others. This is because we will be guiltless on that day. One of the interesting things about that final day, is that when you are resurrected on that day and are standing in your glorified body, and then you come to the judgement seat, you will already know what the verdict is going to be, firstly, because of the body you will be wearing, it will be a glorious body like His own. But secondly, Jesus Christ took your judgement day upon the cross when He died for your sins. He suffered the terrifying judgment of God that your sins deserve. When He was in the garden asking that this cup pass from Him, He was not merely trying to avoid a painful death, He did not want to be a stench to the Father that He loved; He did not want to be credited with the sin that His nature hates; and His human nature was naturally recoiling from the unendurable wrath of God upon sin that He must willingly endure to pay for sins. He cried out 'Why have you forsaken me' as a cry of dereliction when our guilt was upon Him experiencing in His human psyche what every unbeliever will experience on judgement day. Even though we still sin now; even though these Corinthians fall far short of what they ought to be as a church, the verdict

on judgment day is not in question. Christ died to save us from that judgment day wrath. So when we experience guilt for our sins, we do not react to it with the fear of judgement we recognize that God is our Father, that sin is still hated by Him and wrong, we pray daily for the forgiveness of our sins, not to escape judgement but to recommit our hearts to Him, and reconcile the relationship which sin interferes with. Paul's pastoral practice must not be missed. Talk about sin yes, be brutal and direct with sin yes, but all in the context of our justification in Christ.

V9, 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.' God will save His people, He is faithful, you have been called, this is referring to the effectual call of God, where every sheep will hear His voice and respond, this is how Paul puts it to the Romans, 8:29-39, 'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

We are broken messes saved by grace, sin must be addressed, and Paul as a good pastor will do that, but he will do it constructively reminding us of our position in Christ, our provisions in Christ and our destiny in Christ.