

FIRST THE GOOD NEWS

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

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1 Corinthians 1:1–9 (NIV)

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

A popular kind of humor, in the past few years, has been “I have some good news and I have some bad news, which do you want to hear first?” An example of this is that on vacation I had a hole in one. That’s the good news. The bad news was that it was 11:15 on Sunday morning, that’s the bad news. That’s a preacher joke!

In the Corinthian letter, Paul, of course, has to deal with some bad news about the Corinthian church. A previous letter had already been written by him, according to 1 Corinthians 5:9. In that previous letter, which is lost to us, he was dealing with sexual immorality in the church. 1 Corinthians is actually 2 Corinthians. But the first letter, in the purposes of the Holy Spirit, was not preserved. After writing this letter, certain people from Chloe’s household (1:11) have come

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from Corinth to Paul where he is at Ephesus, to let him know that all is not well with the Corinthian church. They are telling him that there are deep divisions in the church. That the church is tolerating sexual immorality, an incestuous kind, among its members, that believers are suing one another in law courts.

Paul has sent Timothy to Corinth to deal with the situation, but he realizes the Corinthians may give Timothy a rough time, so when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrive from Corinth with a letter from the Corinthians addressing Paul with certain questions about marriage and eating foods sacrificed to idols and exercising spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 16), Paul chooses then to send this letter on top of everything else.

It's interesting, by the way, that the questions which the Corinthians raised, beginning in chapter 7, don't deal with the problems they were having, like division, for example. That was not covered. How often this is the case—that we want to ask intellectual questions, when in reality we may be covering up for deeper sins of the spirit.

Paul must deal, in addition, in this letter, with divisions at the agape feast, where some were actually getting drunk. There were some in the church that were even denying the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's the bad news in the Corinthian letter.

But Paul has a practice in his letter, wherever possible, he begins with good news, with what can be commended. He does that here with the Corinthians. He doesn't start with the good news first, in order that he might engage in some form of flattery. But rather, he starts with commendation from the standpoint of their relationship of grace. Because these Christians, like we as Christians, stand in a relationship with God, not on the basis of our works, but on the basis of grace. Paul does not say in this letter, "You Corinthians, straighten up your lives so you can be Christians!" It is rather, "You are Christians already. In light of what you are, begin to act." There is a

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tremendous difference between these two approaches. “Get your act cleaned up so you can be a Christian” versus “You are a Christian, therefore begin living like one.”

I. As we see the good news in these nine verses, we first of all have the good news that we have an authority upon which we can completely rely.

Paul identifies himself as a “called apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” The person of Jesus and the will of God stand behind his call. Therefore, to this church, he must identify himself, first of all—and to us—as one who brings an authentic message from God which must be listened to.

Whenever we approach the Scripture, we approach it from the standpoint that we are not dealing with people who are giving us advice which we can elect to choose or not to choose. But we are dealing with people who speak to us from God. Therefore, it is an authority which can be relied upon. It’s a terrible thing in our lives if we operate on misguided authority.

I was thinking about this matter of authority in an illustration that might flesh it out a little more. My mind went back to the days of my freshmen years in college, during Christmas season, that first year in college, in Springfield, Missouri. I needed to work during the Christmas season.

There wasn’t any employment at home, so I stayed at school and worked. I got a job as a night watchman. I’m scared of the dark—still am a little bit. To walk around that 55 acre campus every night, unarmed, looking for anybody that might be hiding, was a scary experience. On top of that, it was snowy and cold and the campus was not well lit. There was only one other student that was working during those long night hours. He was in the boiler room, this great big cavernous building on the backside of campus with these humongous boilers that fed all the parts of the buildings and the many acres on that campus. Ben was a freshman as well. I did not like being a night watchman, and I would stop in at his place around two thirty or three every

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morning to check in on him and get warm a little bit. He too would sometimes leave the boiler room in the middle of the night, which he wasn't supposed to do, and hide behind a bush. And just as I walked by, jump out and scare me. One evening, after several nights of this tremendous intimidation, I walked into the boiler room, and he wasn't there. I thought to myself, "I'm going to get even with him! I'll play a joke on him." I scrawled a little note on a piece of paper (because it was against rules for him to leave the boiler room—that was a job that required you there continually, reading the dials, something could quickly blow if somebody didn't watch the dials.). His boss's name was Emmett Davis, who happened to also be my boss. I wrote this note: "You're fired!" And signed it "Emmett Davis." He came back in. He'd gone to his dorm for a few minutes, he'd actually been gone about half an hour. He came back in and saw that note, and he called Emmett Davis at three-thirty in the morning. He said to him, "Do you want me to work until my shift is done or do you want me to leave now?" Emmett Davis decided to play it cool. He'd find out in the morning what had happened. He said, "Just work till I get there." Not knowing about the note. He came in in the morning, found out what had happened, and fired my friend, Ben. I felt terrible about it. But I said to Ben, "How could you be so stupid? It wasn't Emmett Davis' handwriting. It was my handwriting. It was a joke."

I use that as an illustration of authority. Ben got himself in a lot of trouble because he acted on an authority which he thought was right, but wasn't. Ben and I still maintained a friendship. I think he moved on to bigger and better things, I don't know. But that was a tremendous lesson for him and for me. I taught you that before you go trusting some note, you better check out the sources a little bit.

The operation of human life is more important than running a boiler room correctly. How you function, how you operate in that life—you have some sort of authority that is governing you and

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controlling you. Some people say the authority is, “Let your conscience be your guide.” Other persons have the authority that, “Whatever you think is ok, as long as you don’t hurt anyone.” Scriptural authority is that we live under the orders of Christ, which have been authenticated to us by His apostles. That’s what Paul is simply saying in this first verse. He’s saying, “I have authority to speak to you.” Since there is authority to speak to us, we do well to listen to what is being said, and not just listen in an audible sense but listen from the heart.

Paul is called “apostle” by the will of God. Just a little later, he identifies Sosthenes as a brother who is writing the letter with him. We’re not sure who this Sosthenes is, but the suspicion is, by reading 1 Corinthians, that he was the former head of the synagogue who brought prosecutorial charges against Paul before the Roman proconsul. And when he failed in getting an indictment against Paul, he himself was beaten by the mob that was around the tribunal seat. Somehow, this man—probably the same man—becomes a Christian and is later associated with Paul. Paul, as an act of courtesy, includes Sosthenes, whom we all know not, in his greetings of the letter to the Corinthians.

But that first verse teaches us that we can give thanks for the good news that we stand on authority.

II. The second thing that is good news in these nine verses is the fact that we are people who belong to God.

“To the church of God in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:1). That phrase “church of God” simply means “the called ones,” an assembly. People who have been called out. It was a word that was in use in Greece to describe people who were participants or attendees in an athletic event; or persons who attended a civic meeting or a concert of some kind. Here in the Bible, it has a

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deeper significance. It simply does not mean people who attend something. It means people who have been called out of God to be together and to be something, to be His people in the world.

If, in the world, you want to experience the reality of God, Paul is saying, “You go to God’s people, His called-out ones, and there you will experience God’s reality.” That’s always a mandate in the New Testament for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, that the world, if they want to know who God is and what He is like, may come to His called-out ones, His church. Paul says that these called-out ones have been sanctified in Christ Jesus and called “holy.”

I now dwell on that a moment or two, because there are so many things that are unsanctified about the Corinthians. When you read this letter and you find of Paul here, in verse 2, that these people, with all their divisions, and some people even getting drunk at the Lord’s Supper are nevertheless sanctified—past tense—in Christ and called “holy.” The NIV has “called to be holy,” which means something that may or may not come to pass. But the actual wording is simply “called holy.” “Called holy” because they are holy. They’re called holy because that’s their function, or called holy ones. Or saints. These people are being called saints, if you will. That’s a tremendous verse dealing with how God looks at us and what sanctification is. “We are sanctified in Christ”—past tense—and we are called “holy ones” or “saints.”

How do I get that? There’s a fascinating description that we find later in this chapter, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, of the kind of people who were members of the Corinthian church. For example, Paul says there were some who were sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanders, swindlers. He said, “Such were some of you” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Ray Stedman was preaching one day on this particular text. He felt to do something he’d never done before. He read this 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 list of people that were in the world and had now

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been saved and were a part of the Corinthian church. And he said, “I’d like to ask if there are any in this congregation that any one of those words in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 would describe before you came to Christ. I’d like for you to stand.” There was a young man in that congregation who had just been converted in a Billy Graham meeting, and had never been to church before in his life. He had come to that church with great fear and trembling. He heard Stedman’s question, and he looked around. For a while, there was an awkward pause and no one stood. Then a little old lady in the second row took courage and stood up. Several other people began to stand. When they were all through standing, two-thirds of the congregation was on their feet. After the service, this young man, who had just been converted, came up to pastor Stedman and said, “I came here with fear and trembling today because I’d never been in a church before. But when you asked that question and all these people stood—these are my kind of people.”

Great change had taken place in the lives of these people and in our lives, as we have followed Christ. Paul says these persons are sanctified. Sanctification is seen by us, oftentimes, as human effort. We’re justified, that’s God’s part, and sanctified, that’s our part. But there’s a sense in which sanctification is also God’s part.

Let me illustrate what Paul is doing here with the Corinthians and what he’s doing with us. I tried to think of something that is sanctified to me. That’s a rough term to get a hold of. It sounds so sanctimonious. It simply means “to be set apart for some specific, reserved, restrictive function.” Something in the Old Testament that was sanctified was set apart exclusively for worship of the Lord and was not to be used for other purposes. Something that’s sanctified to me in a non-theological sense, but would illustrate it, is something that’s very personal to all of us—my toothbrush. That toothbrush has been set apart for a specific function. In fact, old toothbrushes, what happens to them? They go to clean shoes. But their original calling is to be

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sanctified unto our teeth. To be set apart. I am very touchy about that. I have the personal and exclusive use of my toothbrush. That is not even something I care to share with other members of the family. It is called “toothbrush,” not “called to be a toothbrush.” How can you “call it to be a toothbrush” when it is a toothbrush? It’s called “toothbrush.” Just the way Paul here is calling the Corinthians “saints.” They’re not called to be saints. They’re called “saints.” Because that’s what they are. They’ve been set apart for God.

There’s a little difference between a saint and a toothbrush in that a saint has freedom of will to not act like a saint should. But even when the saints in Corinthians are not acting like they should, Paul nevertheless says, “I want you keep in mind your calling. You have been set apart for something in this world. You have a peculiar and special function. You are holy ones.” Paul is not saying to them, in regards to sanctification, “Start acting better and then you can be sanctified.” It is, “You are sanctified. You have been set apart. Therefore, begin acting like it.” He appeals to them on the basis of something that’s already been done.

Unless the Corinthians get into the viewpoint, as some of them had done, that they were holier than other Christians, Paul reminds them (at the end of verse 2) that this is the case with every Christian, both their Lord and ours, who has called us saints and sanctified us. So the people who weren’t acting like it sometimes, nevertheless, the good news is that having been a part of the old world, having been brought to Jesus Christ, they are now a people who do belong to God. That’s the great message to the Corinthians. Paul doesn’t say, “If you listen to me, you can be sanctified.” He said, “You are sanctified. Now begin listening to me.”

Of course, sanctification will actually become a process in which we participate, when we realize what God has done for us in setting us apart for His name and His purposes.

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III. The third part of the good news here is in verse 3, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul usually has a greeting in his letters. In the greeting, “grace” always comes before “peace.” It’s never “peace and grace.” It’s always “grace and peace.” Peace comes ultimately from that great word in the Old Testament *shalom*, in the Hebrew. Which means, not just cessation of hostility, but total well-being inside, being totally at rest. What the psychologists call an “integrated personality.” A person who is whole. Paul says, “If you want to know what wholeness is like, then don’t start with peace, start with grace.” Because grace is that which God gives to us that none of us deserve. But when grace is given, peace results. “Grace to you and peace, from our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:3).

IV. The fourth good news that Paul brings is that we are a people who have cause for thanksgiving.

In verse 4–9, Paul says, “I always thank God for you because of His grace given you in Christ Jesus.” I always thank God for you. How strikingly impressive that is when we read Paul’s letters, and find Him praying for the churches. An attitude of continual thanksgiving. I would submit that, in regard to the Corinthians, there’s a lot Paul could complain about. I think if I had founded this church, I’d be writing a letter of complaint. I wouldn’t start with thanksgiving.

I remember once a favorite preacher of mine was called upon to lead the morning prayer in the church that I was a part of. He stood up, and in his prayer, said, “Lord, we come to You this morning with some complaints,” and proceeded to tick off his prayer requests as complaints. A kind of unique way of putting prayer.

Paul’s not focusing in the beginning on the complaint, he’s focusing on thanksgiving. I thought, as I looked at this, “What a divinely revealing way of dealing with interpersonal problems.” Do

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any of you have problems with another human being? Maybe you've said, with the Psalmist, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove I would fly away and be at rest. I would flee far away and stay" (Psalm 55:6), I wonder if Paul read that psalm when he got to thinking about these Corinthians. "I don't want to deal with that terrible nasty situation. 'Oh, that I had the wings of a dove and could fly away.'" What keeps him from saying that kind of thing? I think it's simply an attitude of thanksgiving. It does take a tremendous amount of discipline to deal with people problems. To deal with problems and not run from them, but to face them. The Scriptures have given us a beautifully appointed way of facing people problems with thanksgiving in our hearts. "I always give thanks to God for you" (1 Corinthians 1:4). We are changed inwardly as we face our problems with thanksgiving.

Paul thanks God for the grace that has been given to the Corinthian church. He really divided the grace in three parts.

A. Paul says they have been "enriched in word and in knowledge." The NIV has "speaking in knowledge." This Corinthian church has content—intellectual idea—content to their faith. They have not been lacking in good preaching and good Bible study. In fact, Paul uses the word you have been "enriched." "Enriched" comes from the root word which means "plutocrat." All of us have an idea in our mind of what a plutocrat might be. Paul says to the Corinthians, "You are plutocrat Christians. You have been plutocrated in Word," and he says "in knowledge." Here was a church that could tell you where Cain got his wife. They could tell you what happens in lands without the Gospels. They could tell you why God doesn't kill the devil. They could tell you why they were Trinitarians. They were enriched. Plutocrated—in word and in knowledge. Most every other church has some great area of stretch, but maybe at the same time some area of deficiency. The Corinthians are enriched in word and knowledge, but they're a little weak on the

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application side of it. That's their problem. Paul can give thanks to God for the things that are true.

B. He says further, of the grace they've received and thanksgiving that is offered, "you are lacking in no spiritual gift" (1 Corinthians 1:7). No charismata. He says this very specifically. Literally, it reads something like this, "You do not lack in not one spiritual gift." He uses the double negative, which is like "there ain't no way." That's a deliberate slang of speech that lets you know "there ain't no way."

Paul says, "You do not lack in not one spiritual gift." He's saying, "There ain't no spiritual gift that you lack." There are about twenty-one charismata, spiritual gifts, in the New Testament. Nine of them are found in 1 Corinthians 12. The rich young ruler had lacked one thing. But this Corinthian church does not lack one spiritual gift. What a tremendously rich church. Not lacking in miracles, not lacking in wisdom, not lacking in knowledge, not lacking in prophecy, not lacking in faith, not lacking in apostles—not lacking in one spiritual gift.

But we know, too, that they did lack love. But Paul can commend and give thanks for the things that are true.

C. He also tells this church, in thanksgiving, that they are "eagerly awaiting the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." The stress here is not on waiting it out. There are some people who are, in respect to the Lord's return, waiting it out. The Corinthians are not waiting it out, in a sense of hanging on. They were "eagerly awaiting." Very distinct. They anticipated the return of the Lord and were eagerly awaiting. In verse 8, Paul tells us about the activity of God toward us, as we await the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. He says, "He will keep you strong unto the end, so that you'll be blameless on the day of the Lord Jesus Christ."

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At times, it's very difficult to translate words that in a given context may have more than one meaning. In verse 6, "Our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you." In verse 8, "He will keep you strong to the end." The language with which Paul writes the word "confirmed" is the identical word of the word used in verse 8, "He will keep you strong." One is in the past tense. Our testimony in Christ was confirmed in you. And the other is in the future tense, "He will confirm you to the end."

What does this mean? There's a sense, when we look at the Lord's work in our lives, that He has a hold on us. Jesus Christ has committed Himself to us and we have been confirmed in Him. It is not a confirmation that, on His end of the line, He is thinking of cancelling. He is saying to these Corinthian believers, "He who confirmed you shall confirm you." You are going to be made strong and established so that, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, your strength is going to be such that you are going to be irreproachable, without a flaw. When you look at the Corinthian letter, here is a church that has flaws. Paul says, "The Lord is going to so establish you that you're going to be irreproachable."

Was Paul a hopeless idealist? Do you really believe people can change? Do you really believe you can change? If you don't believe people can change, if you don't believe you can change, if you don't believe Jesus Christ can change people, I really wonder if you understand what the gospel of Jesus Christ is really about. Paul looked at this messed-up Corinthian church, in many respects the most immature church of the New Testament period, and said, "When the Lord gets done with you, you're going to be irreproachable." Why? Because He is going to establish you, make you strong, confirm you.

This is a real contrast with the testimony I sometimes hear in meetings. I remember, as a child, hearing this on a Sunday evening. A person got up in a testimony service and said, "The devil's

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been giving me a hard time all week. Pray that I'll hold out till the end." You have a feeling that they're just about to let go. They're doing all the holding. You know the grip of a father is stronger than the grip of a child. When you think of the fact that the grip of a father is stronger than the grip of a child, here Paul is saying about the Lord, "Look Corinthians, His grip is strong. He is going to establish you and confirm you."

In our crazy world, we are faced with the temptations of the world, and as Christians in Southern California, we're very much in a Corinthian culture. There's not a whole lot of difference between the culture the Corinthians lived in and the culture Southern Californians live in. Perhaps we look at that culture and say, "There are so many temptations out there. There's so much weakness in me that responds to that." But the Lord is saying to us, through this letter, "Count upon the God who has you in His grip. He will establish you."

Paul then says that the character of God is not only for us, in that sense, but the activity of God is toward us in making them strong. The character of God is with us as well. God, who has called you into fellowship with Christ Jesus our Lord, is faithful. He puts "faithful" first in the sentence, to emphasize the aspect of faith. Faithful, the God in whom you were called into the *koinonia*, the fellowship, of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Perhaps this is the key verse of the Corinthian letter. The Corinthian letter shows us that, in many ways, they were not in fellowship with the Lord. That's why some of the problems had broken out. Paul reminds us that we have been called into fellowship with the Lord. And that God Himself is faithful to that fellowship. "Called into fellowship" (1 Corinthians 1:9).

What does "fellowship" mean? When I have fellowship with a person, when I have *koinonia*, communion, with that individual, what is happening? I think one mark of *koinonia*, communion, is disclosure. I tell you who I am, and you tell me who you are. The Lord comes to us. We know,

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in the Gospels, how He comes and discloses Himself to us—His life and His innermost being.

And He asks us, in that relationship, to do that with Him. And not only to do that with Him, but to open up to other believers as well in *koinonia*, in disclosure and companionship. That’s what fellowship is. It’s being together—in intimacy.

In these nine verses, Paul uses “the name of Jesus Christ” nine times. Nine times in nine verses.

It’s as though he lovingly lingers on the name of Jesus Christ. Why does he continue to repeat, in such tremendous fashion, the name of Jesus? Simply, he’s in love with Jesus and, like when you are in love on the human level, you keep using the name of the person you love. So Paul is in love with Jesus and he uses His name.

The good news is that we have authority upon which we can rely. The good news is we are the people of God. The good news is that God has given us grace and peace. And the good news is that the Lord expresses thanksgiving for us.

Closing Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we do praise You in these moments for Your faithfulness to us. We bear witness to the Scripture “faithful You are, who have called us into fellowship with Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” We become conscious of this, as we read of the Corinthians and their failures. And we become conscious, as we look at our own lives and our failures and shortcomings, that we can become extremely conscious too of the failures and shortcomings of people that are about us. We take our place, today, with You knowing that there are things that we could not do for ourselves that You have done. Knowing that, while there are moments we look at the ticking minutes in our life, we wonder about the uncertainty of the future, You have us in Your grip. And You’re not letting go. I pray, Lord, today, that these words that have been shared will be a confirming word from You into each life that is here. Always, Lord, in a service

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where there are a number of people, there are these differing levels and layers of need. We thank You, Lord, that the water of Your Word will find in the soil the depth that it needs to reach and speak to. In this Word, today, You speak to us. We do pray, Lord Jesus, that as You are faithful to the fellowship with us, we, in our own lives, would reach a new responsiveness to You in our fellowship and in our expression of love and intimacy. May we, as a church family and individual people, reflect You to the world and walk with You. In Jesus' name. Amen.