

A Message for the Day

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

I am committed to the practice of expository preaching. A chapter by chapter, week by week study of God's word. I believe that method has many benefits for any typical congregation of God's people. So under my ministry here we have studied together 1 and 2 Peter, the Gospel of John, and Deuteronomy. That method of preaching benefits me, too, since I don't need to spend time each week thinking about and figuring out what to preach on. I just move on to the next passage.

I consider that a strength, a measure of stability and faithfulness. And in the long run, it gives us the best hope of a thorough and consistent understanding of what the Bible teaches. But that method of preaching from week to week can also become a weakness, because the method can become an end in itself. And if my goal is simply consistency from week to week, I might easily miss the reality that our actual lives are not that consistent. Major events and trauma interrupt our lives all too often, and sometimes I need to be willing to interrupt my preaching schedule to reflect life. Sometimes there is an elephant in the room, and ignoring that elephant in order to maintain the ability simply to go on as usual can render the whole work of preaching irrelevant.

But it should be irrelevant. And preaching that doesn't reflect the reality of life isn't very good preaching. So I'm going to interrupt my preaching schedule today to make specific notice of the elephant in the room. Today is the first Sunday that we have met together as a whole congregation since March 15, nearly two months. Even so, many people on that day chose to stay home and many have made that choice today as well. With wisdom and caution, all because of COVID-19, that novel coronavirus that

is attributed to a worldwide death toll approaching 300,000. 80,000 in the United States alone.

And the response has been a near total shut-down of the ordinary course of our whole lives. By executive order of state Governors, we have been prohibited to leave our own homes except for essential activities. Our national economy has all but shut down. Unemployment has skyrocketed. And worship in groups larger than 10 has been prohibited prior to today.

I wanted to say something about all of that, but what? I had to spend some time this week thinking about what that might be. I often interrupt sermon series for holidays such as Christmas or Easter, but the last time I did so as I am today was the Sunday after September 11, 2001. There was an elephant in the room that day as well as today, which I simply could not ignore.

Today we have taped off half of our pews, so that we can preserve a recommended social distancing of six feet. Many people wear masks, and use hand sanitizer far more than they used to. We're still only meeting for one service, not for our luncheon nor for a second worship service. And we have a camera set up so that those who couldn't come could participate via Zoom. So what should I say about all of that this morning? As I thought about that question this week, I came to this passage in 1 Corinthians 1.

If I asked you your first thoughts about the church the church in Corinth, you would likely mention that it was a church full of division, and other problems. That is an accurate description. The book details those problems, along with the apostle's teaching and instruction. Hopefully soon we can return to a full schedule, including Sunday School, and we can continue to study the book during that Sunday School hour. But today's sermon

isn't about the problems in Corinth at all.

In fact, if I read the text I chose to preach on this morning, and didn't tell you where it was from, you might think from the context that it was in the letter to the Ephesians, or the Philippians, one of the healthy and happy churches. But no, these words are to Corinth, the troubled church.

v.4 "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, 5 that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, 6 even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, 7 so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ."

So it is a word of thanksgiving. My emphasis this morning is,

I. THANKFULNESS WITHIN THE CHURCH.

"I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus." That's how the apostle begins. And that's where I want to begin this morning. That's what I want to say to you this morning. These are not words of flattery or insincerity. If I may use Paul's words as my own, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus."

Likewise, I want to urge you to use those same words with reference to one another. "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus." That's the message of the day.

I've been thankful that we have been able to continue to meet for worship these past 8 weeks, thankful for the people who have been able to come to this sanctuary to gather together at 9:30 and 11. And I'm thankful for all the many others who have joined

in by Zoom. Lots of people, most all of our people, I think. I'm thankful you made the effort. I was thankful to see your faces on my laptop, and talk with some of you after the service. That's been good.

But not as good as being able to see everyone today. There has only been 7 of us, or 8 or 9, at each service the past few weeks. And those who come at 9:30 don't see the people who come at 11. And while Zoom has been helpful, it is still not the same as being altogether today. And this is nowhere near as good as when the day arrives that we can all come without fear of infection and disease, so that we can all say to one another, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus."

Still, I'm thankful for how the Lord has worked in us even when we apart. Thankful for the people he has added to our number and to our fellowship during these past 8 weeks. Thankful for the people and the families he has added to our number during the past year. That's a growing number. Thankful for the people who have made this church what it is for many, many years, some from the very beginning.

I'm thankful for the answers to prayer, even this week. So that's how I want to respond to the elephant in the room. I want to ignore it! I want to look right past it, and give thanks to God. It's been a hard two months. We've had to stay home. Many people haven't been able to work. Or go to school. You haven't been free to visit friends, shop in many stores, or eat in restaurants. Or worship as a church. But still, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus."

So if Paul could address the church in Corinth first by ignoring

the presence of so many dangerous problems, so I'm going to address all of you despite that elephant that is still in our room as well. "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus." Specifically,

A. Our personal thankfulness should be offered to God for one another.

These are such edifying words, for Paul and for us. "I thank God, for you." What a marvelous way to look at each other, and I would encourage you to do just that. Look at one another, and even if you have to stay six feet away, look at one another. You might even want to say these words out loud to each other after the service ends. "I thank my God always concerning you."

So this morning, as we have the opportunity to meet together again, let that be the dominant thought on your mind. You may know some people better than others, or longer than others. You may consider some particularly close friends and perhaps some you don't know as well. Some people you've known for years, and you might still meet someone new today. But in every case, say to them in your heart and mind and even with your lips, "I thank my God always concerning you."

And Paul is particular in his thanksgiving. As I keep repeating, v.4 "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus."

B. Our personal thankfulness is focused upon the grace of God at work in the lives of his people.

So that's what you should be thankful for, that just as the grace of God has been given to you, it has also been given to one another. So thank him for it! When you see a new member join, thank God for his grace to that person. When someone shares a prayer request, or a praise, thank God for his grace to that person. When someone tells you something with which they are

struggling, or something that causes them to rejoice, thank God for his grace given to them.

You see, we are all on the same footing, we all stand on the same ground. Some people may make more money. Some may be younger and stronger. Some may be smarter. Or better looking. Some may have more evident and obvious gifts or opportunities to serve in the church. Some may be new in their faith and others have been believers for decades and decades. But at the end of the day, we are all exactly equal in this very important way, we are all the recipients of God's grace. That's what we need to focus on when we look at one another. Those who believe, those who are Christians, who trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation, they are the recipients of God's grace! And for that, above everything else this day, that is the focus of our thanksgiving.

With that realization that we are all recipients of God's grace, we read further words of rather astonishing encouragement to the troubled church at Corinth, words of great encouragement for us as well.

II. THE CHURCH IS SUPPLIED AND ENABLED FOR EVERY GOOD GIFT.

v.5-7

Let me say again, that is not what you would naturally expect in a letter to this troubled church at Corinth. It might not be what you expect as an encouragement for us, either. We are not very large, and while we certainly don't struggle with our very existence, still I don't think we are really able to achieve a measure of strength and stability in which we can really felt like the church has everything we need. We don't have everything we need. We really need a few more families this year, for the sake

of the work of the church as a whole. We need just a few more families to give this sanctuary the sense of being full. We need a few more workers, a few more leaders, a few more teachers.

And we should pray for those things. But still, from a different perspective, from a better perspective, we have everything that we need. Just like the church at Corinth. We have the grace of God given to us as well! In Christ, by virtue of our union and communion with Christ, we, too, are enriched in every way. We are supplied and enabled for such good works as God has prepared for us to do.

I want you to grasp this, with some very real and genuine encouragement. It is far too easy from a human perspective to identify and list those things which we do not have. And to be discouraged by that. But it is incumbent upon us to evaluate and judge the church according to what we are and what we have in relationship to Christ. That judgment is far different from the judgment of the world measured by all those external, worldly marks of church growth--numbers and statistics. So what are the benefits of God's grace bestowed upon Corinth, and upon us, in Christ?

v.5 "...in all utterance and all knowledge."

The word translated utterance is simply the Greek word "logos," literally the word. English translations vary. Some say "speech," or "speaking." I believe the reference is to the teaching of Scripture. The church had the gifts of utterance, and they, therefore, had the gift of the Word of God. Specifically,

A. God's people have the benefit of his Word.

That's the meaning of speech, or utterance. It is the ministry of the Word. And a church that has the ministry of Word is fully

equipped, for the equipping is done by the word.

2 Tim. 3:16 "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

You see, ultimately it is not people that render us fully enriched or supplied. It is not elders or deacons, or Sunday School teachers, or lots of children, or for that matter lots of money. What enriches the church and enables her to be all that God designs her to be is the Word of God. And the fundamental necessity of a church is to have that ministry.

With knowledge, perhaps well translated "doctrine." Understanding. Spiritual discernment. It could be that the first word there in verse five refers to the outward expression of the teaching of the Word while the second word refers to the inward conviction of it. Or, similarly, the two words could mean the truth preached and the truth apprehended. The word and knowledge.

Beloved, that's a church. A body of God's people joined together in Christ, enriched by the ministry of the word among them--both its proclamation and its comprehension. And with that great equipping and enriching,

B. God's people have the benefit of Christ's own presence.

As you read in verse 6, it is "the testimony of Christ" that Paul says to the church was "confirmed in you." Or more clearly, "among you." And what is that testimony, but the gospel itself.

1 Tim. 2:5 "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time"

Testimony means witness, or manifestation. The evidence of

Christ's presence. That's what makes a church. That's what determines the true church. For so obviously, if the church is the body of Christ, the the presence of the head will be known and obvious. And what is the evidence of Christ's presence?

v.7 "...so that you come short in no gift."

From our perspective, that isn't true, is it? We come short, we are lacking several gifts, at least what we might view to be a necessary abundance of them. But from God's perspective, in God's perfect plan and purpose, we aren't lacking at all. And why is that? Because the source of all those gifts, the power inherent in all those gifts, belongs to God alone, in the person of Jesus Christ. Because it is Jesus himself who equips the church, surely we cannot dare to say that we are inadequately supplied!

Eph. 4:7 "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men." 9 (Now this, "He ascended"—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) 11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love."

Jesus has given gifts to his church, and he will continue to give gifts to his church, "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." And that is the evidence of Jesus' presence among us! After all, we are the body of Christ. The body, the flesh and bones earthly manifestation of his own eternal glory. That is an astounding comparison, causing Paul to give thanks to another church far less troubled by internal conflict than Corinth, the church at Ephesus. He writes,

Eph. 1:16 "[I] do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, 18 the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power 20 which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. 22 And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

We are the fullness of Christ, we the church! We fill up Christ. We complement him and complete him. Jesus is the bride, needing a bridegroom to be completed! A head without a body is a rather ridiculous thought, for it is only a body that is able to complete the head!

Therefore, beloved, take great encouragement! In broad and general terms, the church is fully equipped for all the work God has for her to do because of Jesus' own promise when he gave

his disciples the great commission,

Mat. 28:18 “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” That’s the encouragement. “I am with you always!” That’s the promise. “To the end of the age.” So we shall survive. We shall triumph! The gates of hell shall not prevail against us as a church. Rather, we shall prevail against the gates of hell. And so we are among those whom Paul describes as “all who have loved his appearing.” We are those who are “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,” as Paul writes to Titus.

And that is the context for Paul’s encouragement to Corinth in our text this morning. That is the context for the encouragement which you should receive from this text as well. The context of our equipping and enabling by the very presence of Christ himself as we wait for his second coming at the end of the age! And that is what we do together. That is what defines our very existence.

III. THE CHURCH IS WAITING EAGERLY FOR JESUS’ SECOND COMING.

v.7

For the past two months, we have been waiting eagerly for the opportunity to meet again, all together. Really, we still are, waiting for the opportunity when people don’t need to stay home as a precaution against the infection of a highly infectious virus. As a community, we’re still waiting for businesses to open up, as

they have just begun this past Friday. We’re waiting for the day when something other than COVID-19 is the dominant subject of conversation or the primary thought on our minds.

And that is an important perspective to preserve. That is one of the spiritual benefits of a crisis such as what we have been experiencing as a nation, and as a church. There is a future. There is a hope. And from the standpoint of God’s saving work throughout the world, it is a hope that is coming soon, coming quickly.

It is the perspective on life which Paul embodies as his own earthly life draws to an end,

2 Tim. 4:8 “Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

That’s who we should be, those who “have loved his appearing.” Those who long for his appearing, his return. Those who eagerly await it, who look for it earnestly. That’s who we are. That needs to be our focus. Not COVID-19. Not social distancing. Not washing your hands or staying at home. But Jesus’ return at the end of this age. And with that perspective, with that longing and anticipation, comes confidence. As Paul encourages the Corinthian church, so he encourages us today.

A. God’s people shall persevere to the end. v.7b-8

That is great hope and certainty. Paul writes to the Philippians,

Phil. 1:6 “...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

It is not a vain hope, because it is not a self-hope. It has nothing to do with self-reliance or natural ability. It has to do with God and his power to preserve! Paul writes Timothy,

2 Tim. 1:12 “For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.”

Thus Peter writes of,

1 Peter 1:4 “...an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

The inheritance is reserved for us. And we are preserved for the inheritance. It doesn't get much better than that! We shall persevere to the end. And to make that all the better, all the more encouraging, Paul also emphasizes for the Corinthians that,

B. God's people shall be blameless on the day of judgment.

It's not just that we will persevere, but that we will be without blame, without guilt. Just imagine that! Guiltless! I think that is a very good translation of the Greek word, which refers to someone who simply cannot be called into court. That's what it means to be blameless. Freed from the curse of the law. Freed from the judgment against our sins. There is no guilt.

Rom. 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Now, let me ask, how can that be? Only one way. In Christ! Ultimately, it is our position in Christ. That is to say, we are reckoned to be blameless. We are received as righteous in the sight of God without fear of judgment, because the absolute,

perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is credited to us. And as this great encouragement to the Corinthian church finds its climax in verse 9, the focus shifts to God's faithfulness. And truly, that is our hope!

v.9

And so we eagerly await Jesus' return. Yes, we eagerly await the end of this coronavirus crisis. We eagerly await the full sense not only of freedom but safety to gather again to worship together, to eat lunch together, to shake hands and to hug one another. We eagerly await our economy to return to normal, for millions of jobs in our country to return. We eagerly await the end of Phase 1 and Phase 2 and Phase 3. I think in Michigan there are six phases of re-opening. We are awaiting the return of professional sports, of on-campus university classes and the return of our local schools. We are awaiting the opportunity to eat in restaurants and go get our hair cut and styled. We are awaiting the return of routine medical and dental care, the return of elective surgeries, and the return of public concerts and festivals.

But in the meantime, let this thankfulness of the Apostle Paul fill your heart and soul today, for God's grace is surely at work among us, here in this place. And we are supplied and enabled for everything that we need, “eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Phil. 3:20 “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body.”

In the meantime, as I preach the word of God to you this morning,

v.4 “I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, 5 that you were

enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge,
6 even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, 7 so that
you come short in no gift.”