



Part 6 – The Church’s Gifts and Graces

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

As Paul composed his first epistle to the Christians at Corinth, he found himself writing to a church which courted no small number of problems and controversies. Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggests that the Corinthian church had fallen into spiritual decline for three reasons each of which we can certainly relate to:

1. Worldliness – They had come to believe that Christians lived above God’s law. Their notion of grace

was that since God was gracious to sinners then why should they not sin more and have all the more grace as a result?

2. Pride – They boasted in their worldly wisdom and knowledge. As a result, they came to have disdain for the message of the cross which was antithetical to the world’s notions of wisdom and power.

3. Spiritual Immaturity – They had developed an unhealthy interest in the miraculous gifts which eclipsed any concern for the chief Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. What is more, they had gathered around themselves false teachers – so-called super apostles – who claimed to occupy a higher spiritual plane than the Apostle Paul whom they rejected both for his message and his sufferings.

Nevertheless, Paul opened his letter with thanks for the church in Corinth because of the grace of God given to them and the presence of His gifts among them. Such tender thanks may cause us to wonder if Paul is merely flattering them before he brings the pain. Surely, this is not the case. The appropriateness of Paul’s words of thanks and affirmation in the opening of the letter is grounded in his confidence in God’s gifts and graces to this church. He had confidence that this church, though troubled, was nevertheless an ongoing work in the hands of God to be completed in preparation for the Lord’s return.

Vs. 1 – Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church was prompted by troubling reports he had received about the condition of the church from some of its members.

Paul mentions Sosthenes who is also referred to in Acts 18:17. He was the synagogue ruler, apparently having replaced Crispus who had become a Christian through Paul’s preaching. If this is the same Sosthenes, he also became a Christian in due time and then became an assistant to Paul, traveling with him and helping him write his letters. In 16:21 Paul says that he wrote the final greeting of this letter with his own hand indicating that the bulk of the letter was actually written down by a secretary, probably Sosthenes.

Vs. 2 – Paul may be intending to say something particular with the phrase “church of God.” The Corinthians had too independent and free an attitude about what they did as an *ekklēsia* and Paul is reminding them that it is not their *ekklēsia*, not their assembly, but God’s (Witherington, Conflict and Community in Corinth, 80). He goes on then to remind them that their calling is to be holy – different in many ways from the world around them – and that they are part of, belong to the larger community of Christians. They are not called to nor are they free to go their own way.

The use of the term *ekklēsia*, assembly, for the Christian community would have been particularly meaningful to the Corinthian Christians because that term was in widespread use in Greece for the political assembly, the body politic, of the Greek city-states such as Corinth. There was a new body-politic to which they belonged, the church of Jesus Christ.

Vv. 4-7a – There are three clauses here which point to the lavish generosity of God toward his church. Paul gives thanks for “the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus...in every way you were enriched in him...you are not lacking in any gift.”

Vv. 7b-8 – As is so often the case in the New Testament, Paul reminds his readers of their place in redemptive history. The church of Jesus Christ lives “between the times.” We live in light of God’s redemptive work accomplished through Jesus dying and rising. And yet we wait for the full completion of that work when Christ will return. There is both joy and great sobriety in considering the return of Jesus.

Vs. 9 – Notice how in these verses all the emphasis falls on what God has given and what God has done for them and will do for them.

1. Grace – What God has done for his church.

Vs. 4 – “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus...”

- For grace to be grace it must be free. Grace may be properly understood as God at work. His grace is not a joint effort that he shares with his human creatures. Grace is God’s unearned, unmerited favor which he bestows on any whom he chooses. There is nothing in us which can explain our having received God’s grace. Whatever the current conditions in the Corinthian church, Paul rightly gives thanks that God has bestowed his grace upon them.
- We must not neglect the significance of the fact that Paul is writing here to the Christians in Corinth as they are in their corporate state as the church. “If we are to know the fullness of God’s blessing, if we are to experience all the gifts of his grace which are ours in Christ, it has to be together in fellowship” (Prior, 24).
- God has called the Corinthian believers “into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (vs. 9). The word translated “fellowship” (*koinonia*) may be understood both as the spiritual relationship to Jesus Christ and to the community of people who are called together into that relationship. “In fact, in Paul’s understanding, these two realities are inseparable. To be ‘in Christ’ is to be in the fellowship of the church” (Hays, 19).

2. Gifts – What God has given to his church.

Vv. 5-7 – “[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...”

- No individual Christian can claim to be “enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge...not lacking in any gift.” Neither is Paul writing about the “universal church.” As is usually the case, Paul’s words are applied to a specific body of believers, a local church. And once again Paul couches his words in mercy. Even though the Corinthian church had been erring grievously in their practice of various “sign gifts,” he nevertheless gives thanks for the fact that God has blessed them. The church’s errors in this particular area do not alter in any way the fact that God has poured out blessings upon them. So, while Paul will be giving them rather stern correction as the letter progresses, he does so only after he offers appropriate praise to God and encouragement to them.
- It is not Paul’s intention here to offer any sort of comprehensive list of spiritual gifts. Later in chapter 12 he will give a listing of spiritual gifts God has bestowed upon his church. His point here is to encourage this erring church that God has indeed endowed them with all the gifts necessary for the building up of the church until the day of Christ’s return.
- Every Christian is endowed by God with a certain gift or gifts which are to be used for the building up of the church. These gifts are not talents though they may be expressed through certain talents. The point is that spiritual gifts such as teaching, giving, helps, and mercy are the collective property of the church. They are given by God not for individual pleasure or aggrandizement. Rather, God gifts his people for service to the church. So, when we fail to serve the church through active involvement we are depriving our brothers and sisters of the very things God has entrusted to us for their good.
- Throughout this letter Paul – as he so often does – calls his readers to the future-directed character of God’s redemptive work. Christians live in a state of already/not yet. We have been saved. But we are also being saved and will be finally saved on the day of Christ’s return. Christians await that day with confidence because “God is faithful” (vs. 9a).
- In his book Miracles, C.S. Lewis describes God’s progressive work in the church beautifully: “A new nature is being not merely made but made out of an old one. We live amid all the anomalies, inconveniences, hopes, and excitements of a house that is being rebuilt” (155). Perhaps you have experienced living in a house you are simultaneously remodeling. You know how dirty everything gets, how complicated, how inhospitable your own home becomes. Everywhere there is dust, cold or hot air pouring in from holes in the wall where windows used to be, bare floors and furniture covered with sheets, plastic hanging over doorways, tools lying about everywhere. What an apt picture of the church of Jesus Christ. The work of God’s grace and gifting is a kind of ongoing project of spiritual remodeling until that day we see our Lord.