

Title: Grace First

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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I want to start with a little story—one that might sound familiar.

A mother is helping her young daughter get ready for school, though 'helping' may not be the right word; 'struggling' might be a more accurate description. The daughter's shoes are in one room, backpacks are in another, breakfast is half-packed and untouched, and time is disappearing quickly. The chaos of morning is full on.

Just when the mom is at her limit, the little girl holds out a crumpled sheet of paper, covered edge to edge with crayon, glitter, and stickers. She says proudly: "Mom, don't worry—I have my credentials!" According to her, this proves she is allowed to do whatever she wants, and they can be late.

The mother cannot help but laugh. The paper doesn't make her more ready for school or guarantee success. But she also knows something else: what truly matters is the calling behind it, the heart and intent that made the paper meaningful. Her daughter's paper showed what was in her heart, her confidence, and her belief that she belonged.

And that is where our scripture begins. Not with paper credentials, not with diplomas or degrees, but with calling and belonging. Paul begins: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus..." Paul had a resume: Pharisee, scholar, trained under Gamaliel, and former pastor to the church. Instead, he offers the one credential first.

Recall that the Corinthian church was a mess, with divisions, immorality, arguments over leaders, and even questioning Paul's authority. Paul's letter will soon reveal that they are making it clear to Paul, "Who are you to tell us how to live?"

Paul responds by grounding himself not in human approval but in divine reality: "To those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." He begins with where we all should start. God and God's good grace first. Paul makes it clear that God's the one who qualifies the call and that they are wrong to look first for the qualified. Our call is not earned, not achieved, and voted on. Only one credential that matters: **God called me. God called you. And God's grace always came first.** Everything else is second.

Here at First Presbyterian Franklin, we are in that in-between place — one pastor gone, another not yet called. And in this time between pastors, we are asking questions. Interim seasons raise questions we don't say out loud: Do we have what we need financially with our budgets and designated funds? Are we qualified to enter into this ministry without "our pastor"? Is someone checking our credentials in the soon-to-be-published Mission Study as a pastor looking to lead this church? Should I wait until the "real pastor" arrives before joining this congregation, in case I don't like the new pastor?

Paul would answer that our truest credential is God's grace, not a perfect pastor who can preach amazing sermons, not a full calendar with many outreach ministries, and certainly not a polished program dedicated to families. Those are important, but they are not where we begin. Paul's

reminder to the Corinthian Church is start with God's call first, and the God who calls you will be the One who equips you.

Here is the hinge of the message: we are the church, not because a pastor stands in this pulpit. We are a church because **Christ stands among us**. In this interim season, God is not pausing the story. God is preparing the next chapter. God's Grace first—then calling of the pastors, gifting of ministry, sending us out to serve.

This weekend, our nation remembers the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. During his ministry, many questioned his credentials:

- “He’s too young.”
- “He’s too radical.”
- “He isn’t qualified.”
- “Who does he think he is?”

Like Paul, Dr. King stood not on worldly credentials, but on the same foundation Paul claimed. He began with his call from God. In other words, God's grace and God's calling came first.

MLK said, “I just want to do God’s will.”

His authority came not from degrees, though he had them, but from God’s call to justice, peace, and beloved community. And like Paul, he understood grace empowers courage.

Grace is what gives ordinary people the strength to stand against injustice, to love enemies, to march, to pray, and to dream of a better world. Grace is the credential no one can revoke.

Listen again to Paul. He said, “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift.” Even in their immaturity, God had given the Corinthians what they needed.

And First Presbyterian Franklin, we are not lacking either. We have these gifts in abundance, but their source is from our God. We have:

- Gifts of hospitality,
- Generosity of heart,
- Wisdom from longtime members,
- Energy and vision from newer members,
- Faith, prayer, and resilience.

Church, our credentials are not our perfection, but spring from our participation in God’s grace.

Our mission statement says, “Responding to God’s grace through worship, study, and service.” Notice the intentional ordering of those words. “Grace first—then mission. Grace first—then study. Grace first—then service.

Interims can feel like holding patterns, the plane circling and waiting for clearance. Yet, God wastes nothing. Maybe, just maybe, this is not waiting time at all. Maybe it is calling time. Maybe this is our listening time. Maybe this is our “becoming” time. We are called to remember that the church is not a pastor’s possession; it is God’s. Later in Paul’s letter, he reminds the church, “We are Christ’s body,” said Paul, “and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27).

And here is a quieter truth: Interim seasons change churches.

Maybe the change is subtle—more prayer in meetings, more shoulders bearing the weight of the ministries, and more focused listening for God’s voice through a Pastor Transition Team. Or maybe the change is dramatic, where we discover gifts no one knew were here, find courage no one expected, and learn the church belongs to God and always has. Either way, transformation is a powerful process, and Paul wants us to remember that its source is God’s grace.

Paul has a fancy word for this transformation. He calls it sanctification or being set apart. King named it *soul force* (adopted from Gandhi, adopted and popularized by King), or the strength drawn from moral conviction, not from majority rule and domination.

And this congregation, maybe without realizing it, is being transformed right now. Every Sunday morning. Every prayer for the pastor who has not yet arrived. Every act of patient faith in this middle space. Our call is proven by perseverance and patience.

Friends, as we move toward electing a Pastor Nominating Committee soon and toward welcoming a new pastor to fill this pulpit, Paul’s letter speaks a word we must not ignore. This morning, we admired Paul’s credentials and nodded at King’s. But have we wondered about our own?

Friends, although their work was important, this sermon is not about *Paul or King*. This sermon is about *us*. Not about what they carried, but about what **Christ** is calling us at FPC to carry.

Because Paul did not earn his credential, he received it. King did not invent his authority. God gave it. And this church, right here and right now, does not need to earn God’s presence; God is already here.

The pulpit may not yet have a permanent occupant, but the head of the church, Jesus Christ, has not resigned. The call still sounds. The Spirit still broods over FPC Franklin like a dove waiting to descend.

To be clear, there is only one credential that matters. When all the résumés are filed, when the diplomas yellow, when the ink on ordination certificates fades, when earthly institutions weigh our worth and measure us lacking, the credential Christ looks for is not earned or awarded or framed behind glass. It is not a degree. It is not a title. It is not a tenure. God desires a heart that says ‘yes.’

Yes, to the call. Yes, to the change. Yes, to holiness taking root. Yes, to walking faithfully in the long middle stretch between what was and what God is shaping next.

Paul said yes. King said yes. This church can say yes. And specifically, you can too.

In the end, when we stand before Christ and remember that grace comes first, our greatest credential will simply be that: we were God’s beloved community, and we said yes to grace.

God’s grace first. God’s call next. Our “yes” always. Amen.