

Imperfect Church - Perfect Saviour (2) - A Gospel Prayer for an Imperfect Church

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Crow Road Free Church is an imperfect church. People come here looking for a perfect church, but they never find it. People leave here looking for a perfect church, but they won't find it anywhere. Every imperfect church is imperfect in its own ways.

But while we and every other Reformed evangelical church are imperfect, what we do have in common is a perfect Savior. Jesus is King, Lord, and Head of the church, and His presence in the church more than makes up for all our imperfections. Don't come here looking for the perfect church, because we will disappoint you. Come here rather looking for a perfect Savior, for He never will.

Corinth was an imperfect church, divided and disorganized. Would we have chosen to become members of the church in Corinth? But for all that, it had a perfect Savior. Jesus was creating beauty out of ugliness. He'd called it out of the world and through His sacrificed body, as we saw last week, consecrated it to Himself. Corinth was an imperfect church, perhaps even more imperfect than our own, dare I say. Yet, there is always hope of better things for the church, because we have a perfect Savior.

In these verses, 1 Corinthians 1, 4 through 9, the Apostle Paul, rather than express his disappointments over their imperfections, tells them, I give thanks to my God always for you.

The church in Corinth gave him many sleepless nights, and I'm sure contributed to his anxiety over the churches to which he was connected. But rather than vent his frustration at them, Paul praises God for his work among them. Because for all their imperfections, it was clear to Paul that God had been working in the church there. You know, at times, we might be frustrated at just how imperfect our church is. But just for a while, let's take our cynical, angry, grumpy glasses off and look at the reality of the situation. God is at work among us in remarkable ways.

[2 : 45] Let's take off our grumpy glasses and replace them with glasses of praise. Praise not of our church and how wonderful we are because we're not. But of our perfect Savior, who despite us, is doing amazing things among us. Well, in these verses, Paul gives thanks for three ways in which God has been at work in the church at Corinth. First, the grace of God confirmed, verses 4 through 6. Secondly, the gifts of God provided, verses 7 through 8. And third, the gospel of God explained in verse 9. And the message for us is clear.

Even in an imperfect church like ours, God is at work. Rather than always pointing out those areas of imperfection among us, which we're so liable to do as Scots, let's look for and give God thanks for the ways He is working among us. First of all, the grace of God confirmed in verses 4 through 6. The grace of God confirmed. You know, Paul, he breathes the grace of God. And in verses 4 and 6, he gives thanks because of the grace of God that was given you in Jesus Christ, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and knowledge, even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you.

For all that the Corinthian church was imperfect, Paul was convinced that the grace of God was at work among them. His thanks begins with reference to how God has given them grace in Jesus, in Christ Jesus.

This is always the way. God's grace always flows to us in the channel of Christ. No Christ, no grace, all we have we owe to our union with Christ. You'll know that Paul was especially fond of the phrase in Christ, a phrase which he uses to describe our spiritual oneness with the Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us. The Jesus by whose righteousness and in whose righteousness we are covered. The grace of God flows down to us in the channel of Christ. And that's why the Christian church all over the world wants to worship Christ and proclaim Christ because it's in Christ and through Christ we experience the infinite grace of God. It's not a grace we've earned, not a grace we've deserved. It's a grace freely given to us from heaven. And that grace, as we'll see in a moment, enriches us in every way.

The grace of God, as Paul uses it here, includes all the spiritual blessings Christ has won for us through his death and resurrection. Forgiveness, hope, righteousness, love, fellowship, assurance, and so on.

[6 : 12] All the treasure houses of heaven have been opened to us and God showers us in and through Jesus with his grace. And what that grace does is to make us rich. Jesus made himself poor in order that we might be rich. The grace of God finds us spiritually poor and makes us spiritually wealthy. When the gospel came to Corinth, those who believed came from many different backgrounds. Some were economically rich, others were slaves and possessed nothing. Some were Roman citizens, others had no such privilege.

But they all had this in common. The grace of God made them spiritually rich. Paul is thanking God for his enriching grace. But what he's really thanking God for is that despite all the problems of the church in Corinth, despite all its imperfections, and there were many, that grace was evident. It could be clearly seen. It could be clearly seen that despite all the imperfections, the gospel here called the testimony about Christ, had taken deep root among the Christians in the church and was bearing fruit in their speech and in their knowledge. It was being confirmed among them, in them, and by them. Even though he's writing this letter from a distance, and as difficult things to say to them, Paul knows that having believed the gospel, the lives of many in the church in Corinth were changing for the better. There was evidence of God's grace at work among them.

Despite all their faults, God was at work in the church. The perfect Savior was beautifying his imperfect church. They were being enriched in all speech and knowledge. You'll notice in verse 5 that Paul highlights these two phrases, speech and knowledge. Knowledge refers to how the Corinthian Christians grasped the central truths of the gospel. And speech refers to how the Corinthian Christians were active in speaking forth the truths of the gospel. They knew the gospel. They knew the gospel, and they believed the gospel. For Paul, that was evidence enough that God was at work among them. It confirmed to him that God had given his grace to them, and for that he gave thanks to God. They gave him many sleepless nights, as every church gives its leaders.

But the very fact that they knew the gospel and shared the gospel was for him a matter of great praise and thankfulness to God. There are no perfect churches on earth. Each has its own imperfections. Some are as chaotic as Corinth. Others are as divided as Corinth. I am really suspicious of churches which present themselves as being the finished article, as having it all together. Normally, a smiley exterior hides a shallow interior. But surely, this is at least a standard to which we may aspire and for which we may pray, that we would be a church which both knows the central truths of the gospel and makes known to the world around us the central truths of the gospel, that we would be enriched by the grace of God in all speech and all knowledge. We have our problems, as does every other Christian church. But to what extent do we measure up to the standard of Scripture such that if Paul knew us as he knew the Corinthian church, he could give thanks for us? What like our grasp of the central truths of the gospel?

Do we understand who Jesus was and what Jesus did? Do we appreciate the centrality of the cross on which our Lord died? And do we understand why it was he died there? Do we grasp the significance of the resurrection on the third day? Do we understand the importance of faith as uniting us to Jesus and being the sole means through which God saves us from our sins? It is only too easy to assume that because we're members of a reformed church, we believe, understand, and preach these things. But do we really? Furthermore, if we have grasped the central truths of the gospel such that we own them as the confession of our faith, how ready are we to proclaim them to others? Are we active in sharing our faith with a world which most desperately needs to hear about it? Many churches know the truth, but are evangelistic deserts. Evangelistic deserts. There is no impulse among leadership or membership to engage in mission outside the doors of the church building.

[11 : 47] So these two things, speech and knowledge, knowing the truth, making the truth known, were signs confirming to Paul that God's grace had been poured out on the church in Corinth, and despite all its imperfections, God was at work there. If Paul knew our church as well as he did the Corinthian church, could he thank God for these things among us? Because they're confirming signs that God is enriching us and that God is pouring down the blessings of heaven upon us. Could Paul thank God for these things among us for these things among us? It's a challenge, don't you think, for us to soberly reflect and take stock of where we are as a church. The grace of God confirmed. Second, verses 7 through 8, the gifts of God provided, the gifts of God provided. The dominating thought in these verses is the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, as we spoke of this morning. In verse 7, it's expressed in this way, the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, and then in verse 9, or rather in verse 8, the day of our Lord

Jesus Christ. The second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ was an emphasis in the early church we've rather lost sight of today. Perhaps in our affluent and comfortable age, the thought of Christ coming again isn't quite so prominent as it was for Christians living in first century poverty and persecution. I love the way in which the Christian preacher A.W. Tozer once wrote about this. He said, it is hard to focus our attention upon a better world to come, when a more comfortable world than this one can hardly be imagined. You know, for many of these Corinthian Christians, a less comfortable world than theirs could not be imagined. Some were slaves, but all of them were persecuted on account of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Whether from Jewish or Roman authorities, they were hated. For these Christians, the doctrine of Christ's second coming was an essential element of their hope. Given that a less comfortable world than this could hardly be imagined, the coming of Jesus in glory was important to them. But they faced a problem, for they did not know when Christ would come again. Given the pressure the church was under, and given the internal struggles within the church, would they be able to hold on to the end?

And even if they did, what kind of church will Jesus find when He returns? Will it be a disgrace to His name as it is at the time Paul is writing?

Will it get even worse? Will it get even more debauched and more divided and more disorganized? Having been established and confirmed in the grace of God, having grasped the truth of the gospel and been active in proclaiming the truth, shall this church have the endurance to keep going until the day of Christ's return?

[15 : 22] Now that's a question every sober-minded church should ask itself. Too many churches rest on their laurels, thinking their present strength shall never weaken. 75 years ago, when all of Glasgow's churches were packed to the rafters, I wonder how many church leaders foresaw the day when most of Glasgow's churches would be closed and transformed into nurseries, garages, or climbing walls?

Did these churches become complacent? Prayer meeting attendances began to slip, followed by the orthodoxy of the Word being preached. Spectacular pride came before a spectacular fall.

And we must not think it could not happen to us. Unless the Lord builds the house, as we say, its builders labor in vain. The second coming of Christ is a motive to redouble our dependence upon God for His blessing and His enduring grace. He shall sustain us by ensuring that we are not lacking in any gift, as he says in verse 7. He shall give us everything we need in order to endure and persevere to endure to the end. Do we need strength to bear up under the pressures and persecutions of the enemies of the church? He shall give it to us. Do we need light and understanding of the Bible so that we do not fall into false teaching? He shall give that to us also. Do we need a loving and wise, firm approach to those who are acting in the church in a way contrary to the gospel? Yes, that too He shall give us. He shall ensure that we lack no gift. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 verse 7, what King David says far more poetically in Psalm 23 verse 1. The Lord is my shepherd,

I shall not want, I shall lack for nothing. Then in Psalm 23, David's looking on his life and he's saying, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. David's thinking there of the peaceful times in his life, but he's also thinking of deserts and dark valleys. He knows that God, his shepherd, will graciously provide for him in both places. As was Psalm 23, so is 1 Corinthians 1 7.

God will sustain us to the end in the good times and the bad by ensuring that we lack no spiritual gift. Whatever the need, our God will supply. I love the hymn, He Giveth More Grace When the Burdens Grow Greater.

[18 : 20] And I especially love the chorus of that hymn. His love has no limits, His grace has no measure, His power no boundary known unto men. Listen to this. For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth and giveth and giveth again. That's the tenor of this passage.

He giveth and giveth and giveth again. We shall not lack any gift. We need to persevere until the day of Christ. Be it temptation or trial, be it pressure or persecution, be it conflict or controversy, He will hold us fast. But to go back a step, He gives us these gifts, but He does so as we depend upon Him and ask Him for them. He does so as we depend upon Him and ask Him for them. We dare not become overconfident in our own abilities. Rather, we look to Him who is able to keep our feet from stumbling. He sustains us to the end by giving us every spiritual gift, even as we ask Him in prayer and daily depend upon Him for strength. Notice here, Paul isn't speaking to individuals.

He's speaking to an entire church. The infinite being, it must be the church as a whole which is asking for these gifts and for God's sustaining grace. The church as a whole. To sound somewhat like a broken record. If ever there was biblical justification for the congregational prayer meeting on a Wednesday afternoon, on a Wednesday evening, it's in verses like this where the church as a whole is called upon to pray for sustaining grace. Perhaps all of us here need to reassess just how vital the congregational prayer meeting is to God's continued sustaining of us.

But then, wonder of wonders in verse 8, the apostle says that God's sustaining of us will lead to us being guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Guiltless.

One of my favorite TV programs is The Repair Shop. Other people's as well, right, Campbell? So random people take in objects which are precious to them but have over the years been damaged and need to be repaired. Sometimes it's impossible to work out how are these damaged things? How will they ever be repaired? How will they ever be made functional or beautiful again? But the repair shop workers, they work their magic, they work their magic, and it is magic. And when the people return, they're amazed at how their precious things have been repaired. It is hard to believe that a church as imperfect as Corinth could ever be made guiltless. Over the coming weeks, we're going to hear a sorry story of division, disorganization, debauchery, and discrimination. Surely, if ever there was an imperfect church, it was this one in Corinth. And yet, such is the magnificent grace of God and the gifts He gives that when our Lord returns, He shall find it guiltless. And that is amazing.

[22 : 16] Paul's thankfulness to God, it doesn't drive us to complacency, but to deeper dependence upon God for His grace. His teaching soberly calls us to soberly reflect on whether we spend more time strategizing than supplicating, more time planning than praying. If we shall endure, it shall not be because of our superior planning or strategizing, it shall be because we prayed. And in God's sovereign grace, He answered. The gift of God provided. Thirdly and lastly, verse 9, the gospel of God explained.

The gospel of God explained. You know, the horizon of God's grace for which Paul is giving thanks in this passage is breathtaking. What's involved here is transforming an imperfect into a guiltless church for a dirty church to become delightful. If we'd been members of the church as it was, we would have scarce believed such a thing possible. Of course, it wouldn't have been possible without the sustaining an enriching grace of God and His lavish gift of every grace necessary to sustain them.

But like the master He was, Paul saves the best till last. God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. And this one phrase really deserves a whole study because it contains some of the most beautiful theology in the New Testament. Notice the three aspects of this verse. First, notice how Paul describes the church. The fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ.

That's how he calls the church. The fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ. Now, we can talk about the church as an institution. We can talk about it as an organization. We here talk about the church as being a family to which we belong, not a building to which we come. But at its most basic level, it's none of these things. It is the fellowship of Jesus Christ, God's own Son. Where are you going this morning, someone asks you? I'm going to the fellowship of God's Son. The word fellowship means many things, but its root meaning is close relationship, close relationship. God is faithful by whom He has called us into a close relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ. What a beautiful way to talk about the church.

Those who are in a close relationship with Christ. Those who are in a close relationship with Christ. Does this not make all the sins we so thoughtlessly commit all the more incongruent?

[25 : 17] How can we be in a close relationship with Jesus and yet continue in sinful behaviors? We can't. We mustn't. But second also, notice here that Paul has called us, sorry, God has called us into this close relationship with Jesus. Just as God called Paul to be an apostle and God called the Corinthian Christians to be saints. He called them into the fellowship of His Son. They didn't choose to belong to God as much as He called them to belong to Him. Let's remember that next time we're tempted to give up on the faith. We only ever loved God because He first loved us and sent His Son to die for us.

And then third here, God is faithful. God is faithful. We're back here to the entire theme of Paul's thanksgiving. Namely, that the God who called the Corinthian Christians into the fellowship of His Son is faithful to Him, faithful to them. And therefore, He will give them everything they need to keep going in faith until the end. He will not give up on them, even at times they're giving up on Him.

It might appear that the pressure they're under, the persecution they're enduring will sever their connection with Jesus, but not so, for God is faithful. It might appear that division and discord in the church will break their fellowship with Jesus. But not so, for God is faithful.

In three different ways, Paul is saying the same thing. God enriches us with His grace. God will sustain us to the end by ensuring we lack no spiritual gift. God is faithful and will supply all our needs, even as we grow closer into our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, this is the hope and assurance of every imperfect church like ours. That in our faithlessness, God will prove Himself faithful.

[27 : 39] And that in our poverty, God will enrich us. And that in our weakness, God will make us strong. As a church, we recently celebrated our 200th birthday. 200 years. It really was a wonderful weekend, which I'll never forget. And perhaps someone would like to ask us what the secret of our endurance is. After all, in the last 200 years, tens of thousands of churches in Scotland have shut down, and we have never been, are not, and will never be a perfect church. The ultimate reason for us lasting 200 years as a church has nothing to do with us. It's all tied up with Paul's prayer of thanksgiving for the Corinthian church. Since the very beginning in 1824. God has been enriching us with His grace. God has been sustaining us with His spiritual gifts. And God has been faithful to us.

In a word, the reason for our longevity is God. I close with something I said at the beginning. At times, we might be frustrated at just how imperfect our church is. But just for a while, let's take off our cynical, critical glasses and look at the reality of the situation. For all our imperfections, God is at work among us in the most remarkable ways.

Let's put on the spectacles of praise. Praise not of our church, for there's nothing praiseworthy here, but praise of our perfect Savior, who despite us, is doing amazing things in us and among us and through us.

Thank you.