

# Imperfect Church; Perfect Saviour

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Chaos in Corinth. The early church in Corinth, so recently planted by the Apostle Paul, as we read in Acts 18, had become divided, debauched, deceived, and disorganized.

It was hardly what we might call healthy. Of all the New Testament churches to which the Apostle Paul writes, it was by far the most imperfect. Would we have wanted to be members of the church there? And yet for all the chaos, the church of God in Corinth was called by God and precious to Him. It may have been an imperfect church, but it had a perfect Savior.

There is always hope for the church, no matter how screwed up we might be, because the Lord Jesus Christ, upon whose name we call, is in the business of creating order out of chaos and beauty out of ugliness.

For the next few months, over in the evenings, we're going to work our way through the book of 1 Corinthians under the title, Imperfect Church, Perfect Savior. Imperfect Church, Perfect Savior.

All churches are imperfect in their own ways, and ours is no different. But our sure hope is that, like Corinth, we too have a perfect Savior.

[ 1 : 3 5 ]     Well, Paul wrote this letter, 1 Corinthians, from Ephesus in the mid-A.D. 50s. Often the first few verses of a letter give a flavor of the message of the book. The theme of the first few verses, this message of greeting from verse 1 to 3, is that of being called by God to be holy.

Called by God to be holy. First of all, in verse 1, called to authority, called to holiness in verse 2, and then called to receive in verse 3. Now, I'd like to think that Crow Road Free Church isn't quite as chaotic as the church in Corinth. But as I said earlier, all churches are imperfect in their own ways, and ours no different. But our hope is that we all have a perfect Savior.

First of all then, from verse 1, called to authority, called to authority. The letter begins, Paul called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and our brother Sosthenes.

The letter begins with Paul's unashamed declaration of his authority as a divinely commissioned apostle. As we're going to see as we work our way through this letter, the church in Corinth was deceived and divided and disorganized. It was up to Paul, under God, to wield the strong hand of apostleship, to bring order from the chaos. We read of Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9. Previously, a zealous Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, we read, he was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He was trying to destroy the early church. That is, until Christ caught up with him on the road to Damascus and changed him. Now, the Saul who once had tried to break the church is the Paul who, under God, is putting the church back together again. Christ called him to be an apostle by the will of God. The word apostle, as you know, literally means the one who is sent, the one who is sent. Paul was a man under orders. He was commissioned directly by God. He was an ambassador of God, bearing the authority of God in all he said and did. He was often miscalled and misunderstood, not just by his enemies outside the church, but by Christians within the church. And again, as we'll see as we go through this letter, he was treated with disrespect by many of the

Christians in the church in Corinth. His appearance was not as impressive as other Christian leaders, and his preaching was not as polished as other Christian speakers. But for all that these other Christian leaders and speakers had great gifts, they had not been called to be apostles. They had not been directly commissioned by God, and therefore they did not carry the authority of God in what they said and said and did. Among them all, this unimpressive man called Paul alone had the right to speak as an ambassador of God, bringing to bear upon the church in Corinth God's gospel wisdom and message of grace and of holiness. He alone had been called to be an apostle by the will of God. He alone had the right under God to bring beauty from the chaos. If any church member in Corinth should have said, well, who does this unimpressive Paul figure think that he is to tell me how to live and what to believe? This verse gives us the answer. The Paul that you're speaking of, he is an apostle. He's been called by the will of God. A mere man he may be, a rather unimpressive man he may be, but he's an apostle of God, and he wields the strong hand of God's authority. Now, we live in an anti-authority age.

[ 6 : 11 ] No one likes to be told what to believe or how to live. No one especially wants to be told that they're wrong. Ministers are often afraid of telling a church member that they're wrong because more often than not, that church member will take offense and leave. The anti-authority age in which we live has crept into the church, but we live in an age, of course, without apostles wielding the strong hand of God's authority. So, where are we to look, and what are we to do as we need that authority? Well, some think the answer is for church leaders to become more authoritative in the things they say and in the way they act. What we need, some think, are stronger leaders. We need more men like Paul. To slightly change the quote from E.M. Bounds, the church is looking for better methods of leadership, whereas God is looking for better men to be leaders. So, we'll often pray for a new generation of inspirational leaders who will take the place of apostles in our church. That's how we'll deal with a lack of authority. But that is not the answer, because flawed men puffed up with their own self-importance are a hair's width different from control freaks and bullies. Man-centered leadership always leads to man-centered worship and churches which, on the surface, look very healthy and are well-organized. But underneath it all are communities of the bullied and the brainwashed.

The evangelical church is littered with disaster stories of abusive leadership by authoritarian leaders and thousands of damaged Christians. Paul was an apostle. The office of apostleship has disappeared, but what they wrote is recorded in the pages of the Bible. The answer to the question of authority in the church is to replace the anti-authority mood of the world not with authoritative leaders, but with the authority of the Bible, the authority of the Bible. Our ultimate authority doesn't come from impressive leaders, but from the Word of God being pressed home by the Spirit of God into the hearts of the people of God. So, the call of this verse is to place the Bible at the center of our discipleship as individual Christians and as a church, the apostolic Word. All other ground is sinking sand. The Word of God is the measure of what we are to believe and how we are to live. It is as the Spirit of God speaks through the Word of God to the people of God that God brings order from chaos and beauty from ugliness. The Bible must be central to the church. That's God's call to us today.

Secondly, call to authority, verse 1. Second, call to holiness, verse 2. Call to holiness. Certain words have lost their meaning in today's church, and holiness is one such word. We talk much of grace, and rightly so, but little of holiness. But grace is with a view to holiness, and holiness is the fruit of grace. The word holiness has as its root meaning the idea of being set apart, of being different. God is holy in that He is altogether different from us, and we are to be holy in that we are altogether set apart for Him. We are to be, to use another old word, consecrated to Him, dedicated to Him. And in verse 2, the emphasis is on the holiness of the church. It would seem strange, would it not, to talk of such holiness in the context of the chaos of the Corinthian church. And yet, for all the mess, you'll see from this verse, God has set it apart for Himself, and He continues to call it to holiness. God is calling us as Crow Road Free Church this evening, to be set apart for Him, to be entirely consecrated and dedicated to the pursuit of God's glory and the gospel of God's grace, living very differently from the world around us. God is calling us to holiness.

And in this verse, this is seen in three callings, because the word call is used here all the time, called from, called to, and called with. First of all, called from, called from, Paul addresses his letter to the church of God that is in Corinth. The Greek word we translate as church literally means those called from, ecclesia, those called from. It was used to describe the gatherings of the Old Testament Israelites and is first heard from the lips of Jesus in Matthew 16, the first mention of church in the New Testament. So, the Christian church is the successor of the great Old Testament gatherings of the people of Israel. Israel was called to be set apart and holy, and now we, as the church, are called to be the same. God has called the church from out of the world. There are many other organizations which gather together in a common interest. Political parties, golf clubs, football teams, etc. But the Christian church is absolutely unique in this. God has called us from the world and set us apart for Himself.

God has called us from the world with a view to us not returning to the world. One of the problems of the members of the church in Corinth was that they were living in a worldly way. They claimed to be Christians who had been called out from the world while living as though they had already returned to the world. Some were taking each other to court. Others were committing sexual immorality. Still others discriminating against the poor. But God has called us from the world with its skewed and sinful standards, which means as Christians we are to be different because God has made us members of His church, those who have been called from. A church which reflects the world's standards back to itself is not a church. A church which does not reflect the new reality of grace and holiness is not a church.

[ 13 : 38 ] Is our church different? As individual Christians and as a church, are we different and set apart for God? Are we called from the church? Are we called from? Second, we're called to. In this verse, Paul describes the Corinthian church as those sanctified in Christ Jesus. Now, you know that word sanctified means those made holy.

By virtue of what Jesus has done for us, God has made us holy. He has set us apart. As Paul will literally say in 2 Corinthians, we are new creations in Christ Jesus. In and through Christ, we've been given new hearts, holy hearts, holy hearts, set apart and dedicated for God. Our value systems changed the moment we became Christians. God did something in us. He gave us new hearts. He sanctified us. We're no longer living for ourselves. We're set apart for Him. But then Paul says of these Corinthians that they're called to be saints. Now, although the words sanctified and saints are very different words in English, in the original Greek language, they're both hagios, holiness words. Many Bible translations don't use the word saint but prefer the use of the words holy people. So literally we read here, to people made holy in Christ Jesus called to be holy people. To people made holy in Christ Jesus called to be holy people.

Paul's calling these Corinthian Christians to be in practice what they are in principle. God has made them holy. God has set them apart for Himself. Now, pursue holiness of life and set yourselves apart for God. You wouldn't know it from the way in which many of these Corinthian Christians behaved.

Some took each other to court, others committing sexual immorality and so on. But the call of God is for the church in Corinth to be different from the world around it. To be in practice what He's made it in principle to be holy and set apart for Him. Pursuing love, purity, forgiveness, compassion, grace, righteousness, justice, all these great virtues which characterize who God is.

Where are we in our pursuit of holiness tonight? Where are we in our pursuit of holiness tonight? When I was a student, during the long summer holidays, a Christian friend of mine and I would play golf every morning at Brora Golf Club. We'd get back to the golf club mid-morning, I guess, quarter past ten, and have a bacon roll. And other members of the club would see us from the clubhouse windows coming down the 18th and say, ah, there's the Holy Joes. There's the Holy Joes coming, get the bacon rolls ready. It was harmless fun to be called the Holy Joes, and none of us took offense. But can it be said of any of us here in Crow Road Free Church that when people see us walking into and out of this church, they say, they're the Holy Ones. There goes the Holy Ones.

[ 17 : 25 ] They might not say it kindly about us, but if holiness to us means more purity, more love, more forgiveness, more compassion, more grace, more righteousness, more truth, it would be some testament to us. Because then we're being in practice what we are in principle.

You'll also know that the idea of holiness is firmly rooted in the Old Testament sacrificial system. priests and many other objects were set apart and sanctified for service to God. And this was by means of an animal being offered and the priest or the object being sprinkled with the blood of that sacrifice. That's the way it worked in the Old Testament temple and tabernacle. The blood removed the priest or the object's uncleanness and set the priest or that object apart for service to God.

That's what it means to be made holy in Christ Jesus. And that's why we are to pursue holiness of life. Christ, not an animal, has died to make us holy. Christ, not an animal, has shed His blood to set us apart for God. The holy has died for the unholy to consecrate us to God. As Christians and as a church, we are called to holiness because Christ has lived and died for us. What better motive? Called to.

And then third, called with. Called with. You know, as Western Christians, we tend toward individualism. Me, my wife, and my family are all I'm interested in. But for Paul, it's very different.

He's not a lone hunter. He's a pack animal. And that's one reason he addresses Christians in Corinth by saying of them and to them, together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. The church is a lot bigger than we think, and it's Christ's intention to present it all holy unto the Lord. The phrase, who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a reference to those who depend upon Jesus for strength and salvation. The church in Corinth, though it was so messed up, contained many such.

[ 20 : 03 ] But so did the churches in Ephesus, Philippi, Rome, and Jerusalem. They came to realize that their own good works couldn't save them, that only the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross could do that.

And so these Christians were daily depending upon the grace of Christ for their strength and their salvation. As a church locally and internationally, we have been called from the world and set ourselves apart for the glory of God. There must not be a sense of superiority at any section of the church.

In many ways, the church in today's developed world is far weaker than the church in today's developing world. Despite what we in our pride think, we have much to learn from the church in Africa and Asia and very little to teach. But together with our brothers and sisters all over the world, we call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.

I receive prayer letters from many missionaries. One missionary couple I know work among Mongolians, and their church meets in nomadic tents on the Mongolian steppes. Another missionary couple I know work in one of Southeast Asia's most densely populated cities. Still another works in an African Bible training college training. These Christians serve our brothers and sisters in Christ, set apart for God's glory and consecrated to living holy lives in the society in which God has placed them, together with churches and believers who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. You know, the word holiness may be out of fashion today, replaced with words like missional and grace, but we must remember the salutary words of Hebrews 12, 14, strive for peace with everyone and for the holiness, for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

So where are we as a church and individual Christians in our pursuit of holiness today? How consecrated are we to God and to His glory to live holy lives? That's God's call to us today, holiness. Well, lastly and briefly from verse 3, call to receive. We've been called to authority, called to holiness, called to receive, verse 3. I've never been any good at receiving. I'm sure very few of us are. We're better at earning what we've got rather than receiving it for nothing. We're uncomfortable when someone pays for our meal because, you know, it's hard for us to receive.

[ 23 : 22 ] But if we are both to submit to the authority of the Word of God and to pursue holiness of life, we're going to need help. We're going to need to receive. So we're so thankful for Paul's many prayed in verse 3, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Because to submit to the authority of the authority of the Bible, when it challenges our lifestyle, requires the grace of God. And to pursue holiness of life in the face of all kinds of temptations requires the peace of God.

To do these things, we must freely receive God's grace and peace, for without them, we can do nothing. The word grace here in its context means spiritual generosity, spiritual generosity. The God who called us to Himself is generous, doesn't call us to holiness without generously supplying all we need in order to be holy. He'll be with us in those times of temptation, strengthening us to resist, providing a way out so that we can win through. He'll fill us with love for suffering Christians and give us a forgiving heart toward those who have sinned against us. In our work situations, if we're asked to do something by one of our managers, if at all they are good managers, they'll give us the resources we need to get the job done. Well, our God is the most generous of masters, because from the infinite treasure houses of His glory, He will cause His grace to overflow into our lives like a mighty torrent of refreshing water. So, He's called us to be holy, and He'll give us what we need to be holy.

Through His Word, He'll give us fresh visions of His glory, love and grace in the cross of Christ, and more than enough to set ourselves apart for Him.

The word peace in this context means spiritual prosperity. Spiritual prosperity. It's not a reference to inner tranquility, as we understand it, but to a wholesome relationship to God.

It means how we are to be in a right relationship with God, that right relationship in which we experience is fatherly love and care and blessing. It doesn't mean the absence of conflict, because in the coming days, according to this letter, senior Christians in the church in Corinth are going to have to deal with the immoral and troublemakers among them. But what this word peace means is that even though a storm should rage about them on the outside, on the inside, that experiencing the fatherly love, care and blessing of God. Grace and peace are God's gifts to us. We can't earn them.

[ 26 : 33 ] We may only receive them. Perhaps we think to ourselves, well, I can do all this holiness stuff without God's help. Perhaps we're too proud to admit that we're weak, fragile, and powerless without the gifts of God's grace and peace. But for the genuine Christian, humbled by the glory of God and the love of Christ, we can never get enough of the grace and peace of God. The more grace and peace from God, the deeper our holiness for God. Paul prays for these gifts for the Corinthian Christians. So, we can pray for ourselves today as we, I trust, are relentlessly pursuing holiness of life.

It may have looked on the outside as though the church in Corinth was in chaos, but the Lord of the church, you see, hasn't given up on them. He's given them His Word to lead them and guide them to Christ. He's called them to be different from the world around them and pursue holiness, and he's calling upon God to give them ample supplies of His grace and peace.

The church in Corinth was deeply flawed and needed a strong hand. It was an imperfect church, but it had a perfect Savior. Our confidence here in Crow Road Free Church is that over the next few months as we work our way through the book of 1 Corinthians, God's going to increasingly show us that if we want to reach our full potential in Christ, if we want to be truly holy, we need to dig deeper and increasing roots into Him and into His grace toward us in Christ. If we truly want to be a family to which we belong and not a building to which we come, we need to realign our priorities and our pursuits around God's glory.

Amen. As we, by the Holy Spirit, strive after these things, may grace and peace be ours from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.