

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you would take out your Bible again and turn back to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, just the first nine verses on page 952, we begin a series today on this long book of 1 Corinthians that's going to take us past Easter next year.

There is no church in all the New Testament that has more issues than the church in Corinth. Now, every church has issues.

And if you're new at St. John's, we have a saying here, there is no such thing as a perfect church, no such thing as perfect people. If you find the perfect church, don't join it because you'll ruin it.

So here is a letter by the Apostle Paul, written three brief years, four or five perhaps brief years, after he had planted the church in Corinth.

He'd spent nearly two years there with them. And in that short time, they've descended into fighting, quarrelling, division, and they're proud of it.

[1 : 1 2] Really, we'll come to that next week. Sexually, they were all over the place, and they were proud of it. We'll come to that before Christmas.

They are in danger of idolatry. They were using the gatherings as a place to parade their grand gifts of speech and knowledge.

Holy communion had become a scrum. It's a rugby term that you can ask me about later. It was a way for the wealthy to gorge on their food and to exclude and abuse the poor.

Some thought that they had achieved the resurrection. And in a particularly nasty turn, they had begun to reject Paul personally and his teaching as primitive and below them.

And if you just read the book quickly, you'll see that they were superficial, they were selfish, they were arrogant, they were self-centered, and they boasted about it.

[2 : 2 1] And at this point, I'm supposed to say, just like us. They looked far more like Corinth that surrounded them than the Christ who was saving them.

And the first problem for us when we look at a church like this is to think we're better than they are. And that they have the problems and we're doing okay, which is exactly the spiritual blindness the pride brings that the Corinthians were suffering from.

But all these issues and the difficulty of their rejecting Paul makes the tone and the mood of the first nine verses so surprising.

Instead of outrage and anger, there is genuine thanksgiving to God from the Apostle Paul and a recognition that God's grace has taken hold of very messy lives in a very messy place.

And there's a profound hope that the God who's begun to work in them is going to continue and draw them through all their problems into glory. It is a masterclass of pastoral care, of wisdom and love, in my view.

[3 : 3 2] I think the Apostle would have been tempted to say, you Corinthians, dear Corinthians, you are a disaster. You are giving Jesus a bad name. I don't know why I bother.

He doesn't do that. What he does is he tries to get them to turn away from their laser focus on themselves to see something of the beauty and grace and centrality of Jesus Christ.

And the entire book is like a reproclaiming of the gospel, something that we need to do to ourselves week by week. We need to preach the gospel to ourselves.

And the way he does this in these first nine verses is he combines the marvel of God's grace in Christ to them with a kind of mild and gentle rebuke at the same time.

You can see this right from the start. The very first verse, Paul mentions that he is called by the will of God as an apostle of Christ Jesus and our brother Sosthenes.

[4 : 40] He's not trying to say, I'm a big apostle, you need to listen to me. It's a statement of overwhelming privilege. I was an enemy of Jesus Christ and God came along and even though I didn't deserve it, he called me to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He took me and now I am his servant. And then he mentions Sosthenes. Yeah, this is a gentle rebuke to their lack of love and their self-seeking.

We meet Sosthenes back in Acts 18, when in that very exciting two-year period when Paul is planting the church in Corinth. Sosthenes was one of the rulers of the synagogue, the Jewish synagogue, who had heard the gospel and become a Christian.

And some of those in the synagogue were very upset both by Sosthenes and by others and by Paul. They booted Paul out of the synagogue and they created a riot in the city of Corinth where they tried to get the Roman proconsul Gallio to declare Christianity an illegal religion.

It was a very dangerous moment. And Gallio dismisses the Jewish charges and turns a blind eye where the crowd in their fury grabs Sosthenes, who's a new Christian, and beat him.

[6 : 04] And in the Greek, they beat him and they beat him with fists and feet. Exactly the same word is used of Jesus just before the cross.

So Sosthenes is with Paul as he's writing this letter and Paul holds him up right at the beginning of the letter as an example of the Christ-shaped, selfless life.

One of their own, he says. And I think it's a humbling and lovely and appealing way for the apostle to start. And then he gets into the content of these first nine verses, verses two to nine.

And what he does is he holds up two realities before them and two realities before us, which are able to draw us out of our selfish, superficial spirituality into the mighty plan of God that goes back before the world and into eternity future.

Two points. Number one, the miracle of the church. Now, there's truthfulness and kindness here. Because unlike Paul's other letters, there's no thanksgiving for the Corinthians.

[7 : 16] And there's no mention of their love. You look at the other letters with one exception and he mentions their love. And that's because it's one of the things they sorely lacked in Corinth.

But at the same time, the very first thing he says about them as a church, I think takes my breath away. He says in verse two, he calls them the church of God that is in Corinth.

With all their issues and all their disobedience and all their defiance and all their division, Paul wants them to know that their existence is a sheer miracle from God, that they are a consecrated society set on the earth by God himself.

Caesar had established Corinth as a Roman colony to spread the ideology of Rome. God has established a colony within Corinth, a colony of heaven, a gathering, an assembly that belongs to him alone to spread the name of Christ.

And it is a complete miracle. Four years before, 50 and 51 AD, the Apostle Paul had gone to Corinth.

[8 : 27] He worked with his hands for a while. But in that most cosmopolitan of cities, the bold, brassy, boastful city in the empire, God had established a genuine church as the Apostle preached the gospel, preached the gospel, preached the gospel, preached the gospel.

An outpost of heaven made up of men and women and boys and girls who'd been born anew through the gospel, made new people to live for God in that city. See what Paul's doing right at the start.

The first thing he says, he says, look around the gathering. Every single one of you is a miracle from God. And you probably should do this this morning. Just do it subtly.

Don't look, don't glare. But be aware that every single person sitting around you is a complete miracle from heaven. God has made you, Corinthians, into a church, called you together by his Holy Spirit.

You are different than every other assembly in Corinth. You're not a group of like-minded people who like boating or a certain kind of music.

[9 : 35] You're formed from heaven by the divine nature. Paul says, you're not my church. You're God's church. You're the church of God in Corinth. And it's nothing short of a marvel.

Just as it's nothing short of a marvel church of God in Vancouver. And then he gets two very gentle rebukes to them.

The first one has to do with their holiness. When we come to chapters 5 to 7, this is an area of major difficulty. But Paul beautifully balances the fact that God has already made them holy and justified them in Christ.

And is committed to their ongoing growth in holy lives. You see verse 2? He says, sanctified in Christ Jesus. Already set apart. Already justified and looked at as holy before God.

And then he says, but in Jesus Christ we have a long way to go. And the behavior I know of you, Corinthians, is far from holy. And at the same time that God has justified and sanctified you in Christ Jesus, he now calls you and makes you holy day by day.

[10 : 45] And this book is kind of a how-to of how to grow in holiness day by day. And part of the growing in Christ-likeness comes from our commitment and understanding of each other in the church.

And then there's another little rebuke at the end of verse 2. Not only are they a supernatural creation from heaven, like a divine outpost, but they're not the only show in town.

They're not the only church in Greece. He says, God has called you together with all those in every place who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.

Now the Corinthians thought they were the greatest. You know that Greeks had four games, the Olympic Games. There was an Isthmian Games that took place every two years here in Corinth.

Paul arrived when the Isthmian Games were about to happen, which made his work with canvas very important. They were huge. Huge. And people came from all over the world to these Isthmian Games.

[11 : 53] And the emperor himself, Nero, came and competed. He competed in the poetry and singing competition. And you know what? He won.

Well, they were very concerned about who was the greatest. And it is possible for every local church to begin to think that God's work begins and ends with us.

But Paul reminds them that their standing before God doesn't have to do with how great they are, but has to do with who they worship. Which is exactly the same for every little church in Greece and Achaia and Macedonia and BC and Manitoba.

So as we're meeting here this morning, there are many churches around Vancouver and around the world proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. And how grateful we are. I mean, we're Anglicans.

We belong to a network, a global communion of churches, brothers and sisters all over the world. The work of God doesn't begin and end with us. But what makes a church a true church is that it's a group of people who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[13 : 02] This is what makes us Christians. This is what makes us a church. We pray to Jesus. We worship Jesus as God. What sets Corinthians apart from all the other gatherings around about them is that they worshiped the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

They called on him. They prayed to him. They praised the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what makes you a Christian. When we ascribe to Jesus Christ the same glory and the same honor that we ascribe to God the Father in heaven.

And in worshiping God the Son and praising him, we don't take any glory away from God the Father in heaven. It's the opposite. God the Father has told us, as you honor the Son, you honor me.

In fact, you can't honor me unless you honor the Son. I think this is such a help to us as we begin this September together. If the church is the church of God, then his desires for us and his will for us is much more important than yours or mine.

Our job is not to impose my wishes or my expectations or my plans on the church. But our job together is to find God's and to do that.

[14 : 22] And if we are anything like the Corinthians, and we are, we all come with a bundle of expectations, mostly formed by our own world and the egos that we bring into church.

More formed by that than the Spirit of God. So would you pray that as we move through this book this year, that God would open your hearts and minds and mine, that we'll see God's will and change us to become more like Jesus as we live out our faith here in Vancouver.

And would you pray that the church of God would take the same place in our hearts and minds as it does in God's? And how does that happen? Well, the Corinthian answer is that happens as we move ourselves out of the centre of our thinking and replace ourselves with Christ at the centre.

It's what the whole book is about. How to have Christ at the centre in the practical ethical decisions. So I move to my second point. The first point was the miracle of the church.

The second point is so obvious, it's the centrality of Jesus Christ. And it's possible to miss this when you read it the first time, but in nine verses, there are nine references to Jesus Christ.

[15 : 45] Nine times, more than in any other beginning to a letter in the New Testament. Why? Why does Paul do that? He's trying to direct their vision away from themselves and onto Christ.

And that is the key for growth and joy and usefulness. In fact, the entire book is an exercise of transferring our focus away from ourselves and onto the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because in the Corinthian situation, the danger for them is that they were becoming increasingly embarrassed about Jesus and the cross particularly.

And so they were trying to adapt Jesus to Corinth, to straighten out the hard edges of the cross so that it might be more easily integrated into their lives without transforming them too much.

But all the transforming power and wisdom and love of God are bound up in Jesus Christ, Christ crucified, as we'll see in our third week.

[16 : 50] And the practical reality of everyday living in Christ and in the Spirit is bound up in Jesus Christ and Him crucified. So here is a church which is a holy mess.

And next week, I look forward to beginning some of the issues with you, squabbling and bickering and backstabbing. Where are they going to find enough grace to love each other and to make peace with each other?

Verse 3, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not an empty prayer. Every issue that they face, the way forward is to go to God and ask for His help and resources.

And He says, everything I'm giving you is in the person of Jesus Christ. Or look down at verse 5. One of the worst features of the church at Corinth was the way they used their knowledge and speech.

In chapter 8, we learn that they were destroying the weaker brothers and sisters in the church by the way they used their knowledge. And in chapter 12, they were using their speech in pagan, self-serving, immature and empty ways.

[18 : 11] What does Paul say? Verse 5, he gives thanks that in every way you were enriched in Christ, in all speech and all knowledge.

Amazing, isn't it? Slightly dangerous strategy. You know, the very gifts that they are misusing and abusing, he says they belong to God in the first place.

It's God who has given you these gifts and God can take them away. And I've seen God do that from time to time. But what the apostle does is to show them that this enriching from God was in Jesus, in Christ.

So that the exercise of these gifts has to come from our connection and our communion with Jesus. Every gift we've been given, they're not a way for us to show how clever we are, but to serve each other as Jesus did.

When we come to chapter 8 and when we come to chapter 13, we discover what this means practically. We discover that love is infinitely greater than knowledge. And that if we use our speaking and our knowing without love, it's not just empty, but it can ruin those to whom we relate, and it can ruin ourselves.

[19 : 24] And the way to use them in a Christ-like way is to seek to build up others in their faith by love. It's amazing stuff. And again, he drives deeper.

He goes to their aspirations and their affections. The Corinthians were firmly and fiercely attached to this life and this world in Corinth. Some of them even believed that the resurrection had passed, which means you can forget about Jesus coming, which makes a church that is triumphalist and a bit angry and indulging in the pleasures of Corinth.

But look at verse 7. The apostle wants them to see that they are waiting for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. That there is a day coming when Jesus will return, and he will be revealed for all eyes to see.

His coming will be public and personal and physical and visible and universal and unavoidable. And that means that as Jesus becomes more central to us, one of the marks of that is we'll live in the light of the future.

And that means that God hasn't finished with us yet. Because between now and when he comes, there is this extraordinary promise in verse 8. That God will sustain you to the end, guiltless, in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[20 : 50] It's an almost unbelievable promise. Particularly when you remember the absolute mess there is in Corinth, or when you look at your own life, when you look at mine.

God has undertaken here to sustain us each day, and the all of each day, to bring us into his presence in the end, without any mark, without any sin, without any guilt.

It's amazing. It's so full of hope and encouragement. And it means our whole life centers on the person of Jesus Christ. When we come to faith, God opens our eyes to see all the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And we begin to call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And God confirms the preaching of Christ in our hearts. And the Holy Spirit opens our eyes so that we can see the truth about Jesus, and opens our hearts to repent toward him.

And day by day, we learn to rely on him. And the way we do that is by taking promises like this. I remember discovering this promise about 15 years ago, that he will sustain us guiltless to the end.

[22 : 04] It kept me going for about six months, that promise. And he will present us faultless, without blemish, guiltless in the day of Christ. I need to finish.

What's it all based on? How can Paul be so confident of the messy Corinthians? How can we be so confident? How do we know that God is going to do this?

Verse 9, it's because of the faithfulness of God. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship, the communion, of his Son, of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

God's mercies never cease. His compassion, it never fails. It doesn't change. He never cools in his commitment to us.

His love never decreases. His faithfulness is unswerving, unending, unending, unshakable, unwavering. And he is faithful to this, calling us into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ, which means he calls us to Christ, and to each other, into the fellowship.

[23 : 20] We cannot be committed to Christ, without being committed to each other. And that means his work here today, as it was in Corinth, is to bring us closer to each other, and finally, into his own presence, on the day of the Lord Jesus Christ, when he will present us guiltless before him.

And that's the first nine verses of Corinthians. So let's kneel and pray together.