

"Guest" Speaker Gil Balch

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Preacher: Gil Balch

[0 : 00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! 1 Corinthians 1-1. This is the Word of God. 1 Corinthians 1-1.

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1 Corinthians 1-1. 1 Corinthians 1-1. Oh, God bless the preaching and the hearing of your word.

[1 : 43] The science of modern camouflage began during World War I, when zoologists noticed how many species in the animal kingdom would change color to hide from predators.

Artists then took their ideas and created the modern camo. Today, it's used in almost every sector of the military, and we reap the benefits such as hunting wild game.

The real strength in camouflage, of course, is that it has the ability to hide things that are in plain sight. So now, when you get decked out in your camo, you can get closer than you otherwise would to your next 10-point buck.

As we look around at our church and the world around us, each of us has varying degrees of awareness of God's activity. We often walk around without paying attention to see the Lord, who is hiding in plain sight, as it were.

It's as if God's work is camouflaged from us. In the gathering of the church, we can get fixated on any number of things. We may be aware of others' shortcomings, or how the acoustic guitar player missed another chord, which would never happen of our guys.

[2 : 59] We may tend to measure one another up, or we can think about what we're doing after the service. You may be enduring blinding pain, or maybe you're just trying to get to church on time.

All the while, these things may be camouflaging what's going on around us, and at times giving us a skewed understanding of our identity. At first glance of our text, it appears that maybe Paul's missed the mark with an inaccurate interpretation of the facts.

If you're tracking with our text, did you notice that Paul's words were pretty positive? From these verses alone, you might conclude that this was a reasonably healthy church.

Was that true? Corinth itself, as a city, was a thriving city. And because it was a newly built city that was built on a port, it had a strong economy, and attracted tourists and entrepreneurs, and it soon became proud of its wealth and opulence.

The city was young, and it had a strong economic boom. They loved to show off their money. Even worse, the city was known for their gross immorality, and so that the town's name, Corinth, became a byword in the surrounding areas for such sins.

[4 : 25] From the outside, it would seem like this church, though, had it going on. They were a young church plant. Tithes were up. They were prosperous and diverse. And there was a lot of spiritual activity.

But this church was very much at home with the culture around it. They looked and acted like the rest of the world around them. In so many ways, this was not a healthy church.

They were spiritually immature, divisive, cliquish. There was drunkenness and gluttony when they gathered for fellowship, incest among church members, uncertainties about marriage and food sacrifice to idols, and a misuse of spiritual gifts.

They were proud of their wealth, arrogant. They lacked an understanding of God's demand for holiness among God's people. And among other things, it appeared that they had a lack of love for one another. In this environment, it might have been hard to see the Lord's work.

Many may have called this congregation a false church. But Paul offers a different perspective. In this greeting that we read, Paul is setting the stage for everything that he's about to address in the letter.

[5 : 35] But he doesn't only give correction. Paul is also pointing out the very things that are hidden in plain sight. He doesn't want the Corinthians to miss what's standing right in front of them.

The Lord uses Paul to encourage this church in this section of the letter. And Paul's words to the church in Corinth are meant to encourage every church. I think the Lord would want to brighten our hearts and being confident in our identity.

What Paul did for them, God wants to do for us. So I think the main point for us today is, remember, as God's child, you have a unique identity in Jesus Christ.

Throughout his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is consistently trying to reshape their thinking about who they were. Likewise, we aren't simply a random collection of Christians that happen to worship in the same place.

We're knitted into the family of God, both locally and cosmically. We are the holy people of God. This is no random assignment. It's a sacred calling.

[6 : 47] Remember, as God's child, you have a unique identity in Jesus Christ. This text includes three truths that describe our identity as the chosen inheritors of the call of God.

And with these truths, the Lord wants to shape or reshape our thinking. All of them are big truths, but just a heads up, point one will be a little longer than the rest, so stay with me.

Point number one, we are a people who are created by God and for God. We are a people who are created by God and for God. Paul writes his introduction in typical fashion.

Again, he alludes to some of the main themes that he's going to be addressing later, but this isn't the only thing he's doing. He's also pointing the Corinthian church to something else. These few verses have God's fingerprints of his sovereign work all over them.

We see it in the very first sentence. Paul, called by the will of God. Paul has an authority that wasn't given by any person. He wasn't voted in by the will of the people, and it wasn't taken by force.

[7 : 57] God chose Paul for this task. The Lord appointed Paul to serve this church. He was God's mouthpiece. Every authority is given by God, and every true church is established by the purposes of God.

The Lord's in charge. The Lord's in charge here, directing things. Paul is trying to shape their identity and point them, point their gaze to the work of God.

Now, those words, sanctified and saints, in verse 2, are kind of a play on words. They actually come from the same root word. This word, sanctified, is used in two different ways in scriptures.

We typically use that term in a progressive way, as in how we're being transformed into Christ's image. So when we grow in holiness, we usually say we're being sanctified, which is absolutely true.

However, that's not how this word is being used here. Its use is based on a one-time event in the past, and then it has ongoing implications.

[9 : 00] The idea is that the believers are set apart. In the Old Testament, the utensils that were used in the tabernacle, they were sanctified by Moses through anointing, through a process.

In the same way, the priests were sanctified, or set apart. The purpose of the sanctification was so that the utensils or the priests could be used in the service of the Lord.

So in the case with the Corinthians, this was God taking possession of the believers, bringing them out of something, and giving them a new identity and a new purpose. Every Christian is likewise sanctified in Christ Jesus.

He sets us apart for his special service. It's not just for the select few, only the really gifted people. No. We are called out of the world, unto the Lord.

We are the Lord's. Sort of him putting his stamp on us. And so, for Paul to say this to the Corinthians is actually kind of controversial, considering who they were.

[10 : 15] Remember, this is a church who was acting no differently than the world around them. Many in the Corinthian church, many of those, they were rescued from the Greco-Roman filth around them, as one commentator put it.

And then they were giving themselves to prostitutes. Paul says, don't you remember that God changed you? He set his favor on you. Does that not mean anything? But instead of criticizing them, Paul begins his letter with just a reminder of their identity.

When we are united with Christ, we cannot remain unified with the world. We have a new identity. And so, we too need to test our hearts to see where we're tempted to compromise with the world. Does our identity with Christ affect how we live? Is our Christianity camouflaged from others? Your sanctification means you've had a change in identity. Praise the Lord. And our new identity must affect how we live. Now, you can also see how these two uses of sanctification are very closely related.

[11 : 26] Positional sanctification, like we're using it in this text, has to do with this one-time event that sets believers apart. But progressive sanctification is this ongoing process where we become more and more godly.

And the Lord calls us to continually grow into the likeness of Christ. And that process doesn't happen without community.

We see that right there in the text. Paul addresses them as a single unit. Look down in verse 2. The church of God in Corinth and together with all those who in every place.

So he addresses them as a whole unit. And he addresses them as individuals. In some ways, by saying those. This important contrast of the individual members and the corporate body is drawn out more in chapter 12 of this book.

1 Corinthians chapter 12 says, But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?

[12 : 39] As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. And he concludes this section by saying, Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Paul's alluding to that here in verse 2 of our text. But you can see how Paul makes much of this whole and individual participation. As an individualistic culture, we tend to emphasize the personal facet to Christianity, which is important.

But the biblical authors equally highlighted the communal side, our common faith. When the Lord calls, as Walt said, as the Lord calls a person into relationship with himself, he calls them to a local church.

sanctification doesn't happen apart from community. If we're living apart from community, very little, if any, sanctification may be happening.

Think of all the Bible verses that have the words one another in them. We just read one of them. forgiving one another. Be at peace with one another.

[13 : 53] Love one another. Show hospitality to one another. Teach and admonish one another. Exhort one another. We can keep going. But these texts can't be obeyed apart from being community with the church.

And these texts are the things that sanctify us. Think about it. If you've been wronged in the church, do you think it's easy to obey Ephesians 4.32 that says, forgive one another?

That's difficult. The Lord calls us to forgive. That's going to be hard. But that's the process of sanctification. When we obey that, when it's hard, that sanctifies us.

You've already been sanctified, so be sanctified, Paul says. There are so many blessings when believers live in covenant community with one another.

In the Old Testament, the Lord made a covenant with the children of Israel. But the New Testament actually speaks about believers in the church in the same kind of way. And not just individual covenant with the Lord, but we're to live in covenant relationship with one another.

[14 : 55] This is why we have church membership. In many ways, it's an echo of God's call to Israel. So whatever their race, whatever their background, whatever their upbringing, they are now God's covenant people and so are we.

Hallelujah. We're not a social club united around anything other than Jesus. Nor are we only separate pieces of a body detached from one another.

Roy Champa of these verses said he is not comparing them to any other social club or society in town, but evokes their place in God's cosmic plan.

The commitment that each of these new members has made to this fellowship is not casual. I respect you. The Lord wants us knit together in him.

And I guess I've heard Walt say many times that Christian life is a community project. It's not a DIY activity. The church is the place where God most fully expresses his presence.

[16 : 04] That's an amazing thought. We can't lose that wonder. It's here that God dwells with us. Let's kindle our affections for the church.

It's God's church. It's where he's at work. We belong to something bigger. Well, in addition, Christians participate in a broader corporate context.

Look again at verse 2b. Called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul links their identity with the worldwide unity of all Christians which includes us. It's an appeal to something bigger than our church.

As one author put it, a church that's aware of its connection to the church universal is less likely to be absorbed by its own problems. This is why we regularly pray for churches in our area and why we keep close connections with other churches in our denomination like Songwon in Korea and we have a mission trip going to Sovereign Grace Church in Korea coming up or the church that I've been a part of for the past 10 months in Louisville.

[17:19] We're part of something bigger than just ourselves. We participate in a cosmic reality. We aren't the only ones and if we catch a vision for unity of Christians in every place from all times it can change how we view one another.

You are God's people. Now before we move on I think we would do well to comment on one more word in this section. Paul's already mentioned it once and we tend to move past too quickly but it's good to slow down and look at the word called.

Again this church was established by the very will of God. It's not as if they decided to gather their friends and start meeting together and hear God's word preached. The church was called into existence and the Lord called each individual to be a saint and we're called to be together.

He called us church, called us to be saints and he called us to be together. He gets to determine our identity. We are a people created by God and for God.

This leads to the second description of our identity. Point two. We are a people among whom God is present and at work. We are a people among whom God is present and at work.

[18:44] Verses four through eight are summarized with a single clause. I give thanks. Everything in this section is under that header. So it's important for us to find out what makes Paul give thanks.

And after this initial greeting you really begin to see Paul's love and care for this congregation. The heading in my Bible says thanksgiving out above verse four.

That's a good description. Paul says I give thanks to my God always for you. Paul is bursting into doxology praising God for this church and for God's work in them.

And notice where the praise is directed. He praises the Lord. Praise God. Paul isn't offering a flowery commendation of their accomplishments.

He's not praising them. He's praising the Lord for all the grace that's been poured out on them. You can hear the tone. It's meant to be encouraging to instill confidence in God's grace and to continue shaping their identity as God's chosen people.

[19:53] So God's given them saving grace but he also wants Paul wants them to see that God's given them grace and spiritual gifts. This is one of the topics that he's going to address later in the letter.

But Paul's thanksgiving is meant to direct their gaze toward the Lord. The Corinthians had a problem. They were beginning to think that God's wonderful gifts was a result of their own spiritual achievement.

And Paul says nope I thank God for what he's given you and you should too. Paul reminds us too that every blessing we have comes from him. That's a no brainer.

We know every blessing comes from him but the potential for pride is enormous which is why he goes on to say what do you have that you didn't receive? Everything we have in our very life we owe to the Lord.

And these gifts were given to individual church members to serve the church as a whole. Look down there at verse 5. In every way you were enriched in him.

[21:02] And then there in verse 7 it says you are not lacking in any gift. No single member had every gift. But the church as a whole was not lacking in any gift.

As an aside each time Paul addresses the church as a whole he uses the plural form of you which as we all know the plural form of you is y'all.

Thank you. Keeping you engaged here. Alright. But do you again notice the strong corporate aspect to this language? The only way that they don't lack is if each person in the congregation is serving using their gift.

No one's on the sidelines watching others do ministry. And the encouragement for us is that he's given each of us a part to play in the body. A healthy church is one where everyone gets to participate.

Paul is thanking God for the existence of spiritual gifts in their church even though this is the very area he has to correct them later. He thanks God for their gifts of speech and knowledge specifically.

[22 : 18] But really what Paul is doing here is what some have called identifying evidences of grace. Identifying evidences of grace. There's another place in the book of Acts that more explicitly describes this practice of identifying evidences of grace.

When Barnabas was sent to the new Gentile church in Antioch in Acts chapter 11 Acts 11 23 says when he came that's Barnabas when Barnabas came and saw the grace of God he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.

Barnabas took notice of God's work in their lives. Paul's doing the same thing in our text. It's as if he's removing the camouflage to help them see God's work among them.

Look down at verse 4 again and says I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus. Paul is rooting their faith in what God has done but he's also confirming that God is still at work in the church.

Listen something happens when we point out the activity of the Lord in other people's lives. It motivates people in the direction where we want to encourage them.

[23 : 44] When addressing that topic in his book Humility C.J. Mahaney helpfully said we motivate others by grace when we perceive where and how Christ is at work in their lives.

So in a very practical way we should be on the lookout everywhere for evidence of the diverse spiritual gifts in the church. when we watch out for these kinds of things it's like when the military uses infrared imaging.

They see the heat from bodies and it shows things that are hidden. You find things that are hidden in plain sight. It's as if to say God's at work.

He's at work among us. He's at work in you. And there are demonstrations of faith and mercy among us. There's administration going on, generosity. Every week we have more than a dozen people serving in all kinds of areas on Sunday morning.

The parents and teens who are watching your children right now teaching them sharing the gospel with them are serving the Lord and it's a huge evidence of grace.

[24 : 54] Here's a suggestion. If you have kids when you go and pick them up would you take an extra moment or two to encourage them? Point out evidence that this is God's grace.

Take just a moment. I know it's crowded back there. But take just a moment. Thank them. Encourage them. Their service is crucial to the life of this church and your whole family is blessed because of them.

We can also be on the lookout beyond just spiritual gifts and take notice how the Lord is at work in all kinds of ways. One of our professors at Pastors College encouraged us to study the fruit of the Spirit.

Love, joy, peace, patience, etc. For the purpose of identifying it when we see it and pointing it out in others. I love that. If we do that we'll be following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul and we'll soon notice that the Lord is at work all around us.

That's right. That's right. Every prayer offered for others. Every encouragement given. Every listening ear. Every note on the guitar.

[26 : 00] Every cymbal crashed, Tim. Every voice lifted to God in worship. In each of these ways you're participating in enriching the church. This is evidence that the Lord is here and he's at work.

It's a gift. The Lord is at work through you, through y'all. Think about that. The Lord of all glory. He's here at work among us.

This is amazing. It should fill us with joy and hope. God's among us. But what would it look like if Paul didn't encourage these Corinthians?

What if this text wasn't here? None of us knows for sure of course but I suspect that our churches might look quite a bit different. Many of us might be motivated by guilt.

Weighed down by the pressures to always do better. Christians may be unsure of God's activity in their lives. Perhaps some would be prone to despair and tempted to give up.

[27 : 11] Now that may be overstated but maybe not. We can't dismiss the power of encouragement. For you parents how many times have you had to correct a certain heart pattern that needs attention but when you pointed out progress in that area it seems to stimulate more growth or even in our own hearts.

If someone encourages you in an area that you know you've struggled with but you may have seen some progress but you know you have a long way to go if somebody encourages you it spurs you on to want to keep going.

Pointing out evidences of grace helps spur others on. But unfortunately many of us find it difficult to practice this. identifying evidences of grace.

Sometimes we can be more of other people's faults than we are of any positive qualities. Sadly we can be better at identifying critique.

I'm always encouraged by this church but I know that this is an area I've had to grow in myself and I've had to confront the fact that a critical heart is not a gift of the spirit.

[28 : 19] But thankful the Lord speaks through Paul to give us a wonderful example. The presence of their sin does not cloud Paul's view of this church.

In his commentary David Pryor he says of these verses Paul looks at the Corinthian church as it is in Christ before he looks at anything else that is true of the church.

Paul's model stresses the importance of God's sovereign work above anything else. That's a good motivation. Not shame but acceptance.

We're a church in Christ before anything else. And the Lord is at work. Verse 6 further illustrates the fact that God does indeed want this church encouraged by his work.

It says even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you. The New Living Translation puts it this way. This confirms what I told you about Christ is true.

[29 : 24] I think that gets at it. The Lord here is confirming his work among the church. Paul preached the gospel. They believed. God granted spiritual gifts among them.

It's as if to say God's saying you're mine. So we're a people created by God and for God. We're a people among whom God is present and at work.

And point three, we're a people whose ultimate hope is Christ and his return. Paul has spoken of past grace.

Remember the sanctify, this one time event happened in the past. He's talked about present grace, these gifts, these things that are happening, ongoing, are going on right now. And now he looks to what God is going to do in the future.

What's he going to do? Look at verse eight. He will sustain you to the end guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

[30 : 26] This has strong undertones of the judgment that is coming. In both the Old and New Testaments, the day of the Lord is the time at the end of the age when God will pour out his wrath against evil and gather his children to himself.

Paul adds Jesus Christ at the end of that phrase. And it probably suggests that Christ is the one coming to execute judgment. Paul has the last day in mind with these verses.

But there's a problem that remains. This Corinthian church was immoral. And the Lord's coming to bring judgment on evil. That's a problem. And if we're honest, we have to realize that we're in the same predicament.

Now, our wrongdoings look different from theirs, I'm sure, but we've all sinned against the Lord. As James says, we all stumble in many ways. Even so, we can confidently proclaim with Paul that we too will be found guiltless.

We are counted guiltless because someone else was found guilty. guilty. When Jesus hung on the cross, God the Father was transferring all the punishment that we deserve for our sins onto Christ.

[31 : 42] For we who belong to God, we enjoy a blameless status, even though we're the ones that transgressed. Jesus Christ was the one rendered guilty.

The same one who will one day bring judgment for those who do not belong to him, this one suffered in our place and for our punishment. All because God in his love chose to rescue sinners and bring them to himself.

This is the Corinthian identity and it is our identity in Christ. Guiltless. Amen. If it were up to us to keep ourselves blameless, we've already blown it.

But right standing before God rests in Christ's work. That's why in 1 Corinthians chapter 2, Paul says he preaches Christ alone.

And he models that because in these nine verses, he mentions Christ or Jesus Christ nine times in nine verses. The person and work of Christ is absolutely central to the work of God.

[32 : 49] And there's a bit of a contrast between the Corinthian spiritual gifts and God's gift of being found guiltless.

This church has every spiritual gift at their disposal, but that counts for nothing if they don't have Christ. No amount of prophecy, words of speech, knowledge, service, or any good work will wipe away our sins.

Matthew 7 22 says, On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name?

Think spiritual gifts. And then I will declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness. Ultimately, we need one who will stand in our place and receive the guilt that we deserve.

We need forgiveness. forgiveness. And it is offered through Christ. And it is received only as a gracious gift by faith.

[33 : 52] In some ways, Paul is saying to be found guiltless is a far better treasure than any spiritual gift that he gives. So that means that for the Christian, if Christ is our treasure, the best is yet to come.

The return of Christ is our ultimate hope. we don't just have a right standing before the Lord, a legal status of guiltless, which we do.

We also have the promise that he's going to sustain us to the end. The same power that destroys evil will sustain, establish, and uphold us every moment of our lives.

In John Bunyan's book, The Pilgrim's Progress, the main character, Christian, has just arrived at the gates of the celestial city. Heaven.

He just arrived at heaven. But there's one more obstacle for him to cross before he enters. It's a very deep river. It has no bridge.

[34 : 58] The river represents death. Christian and his companion that he's traveling with, hopeful, looked for another way to cross. But they realized they had to swim.

As they entered the water, Christian began to sink in despair and cried out to his friend. Hopeful encouraged his brother and said, Be of good cheer, my brother.

I feel the bottom, and it is good. God is the one who will keep us firm to the end.

Our confidence may be small. We may be weighed down with failings or shame or regret or guilt. But God says he will keep us guiltless all the way to the day when we see him face to face.

And if we're in Christ, we will not only be found without guilt or blame, but the Lord Jesus Christ himself will embrace us as his child.

[36 : 03] Our identity will be confirmed in that day. God will sustain us to the end because he is faithful. Just like it says in verse 9, I believe that the Lord would want to draw us away from any self-confidence.

God is faithful. faithful. Our hope is not in how well we serve one another. It's not in our gifting. Our hope is not in how rich our fellowship is.

Our hope is grounded in the very faithfulness of God. He will sustain you to the end guiltless. The Lord claims those who are his own.

Remember, as God's child, you have a unique identity in Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you.

Thank you that you have called us, Lord, to yourself. thank you that you are building the church. The word says the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

[37 : 14] Thank you that we see evidences of grace all over the place, Lord. I pray you would open our eyes to see these things more. We would kindle our affections for our church, Lord. Lord.

And I pray we would root our hope in your presence in the return of Christ. Give us confidence of your faithfulness, Lord. Oh, God, you are faithful.

Regardless of how we feel, you remain faithful. So, we thank you for that in Jesus' name. Amen.

You've been listening to a message at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens.

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