

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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[0 : 00] Who am I? Who are we? This question of identity is perhaps one of the most important questions a person can ever ask, isn't it? That's the question that really drives the passage that we're looking at together today. Our text this morning is 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 1 through 9.

That's page 952 in the Pew Bible. If you're new to the Bible, the big numbers are the chapters and the small numbers are the verses. That'll help you find your way around. We're starting a new sermon series today in this book of 1 Corinthians. And if you're new to Trinity, our typical practice on Sundays is to pick a book of the Bible and simply teach straight through it, section by section, pulling no punches, leaving no verse left unturned. One of the most basic claims of Christianity is that Jesus continues to lead and guide his church through scripture. That God, in fact, continues to speak through the words of the Bible. So teaching through whole books is a way to ensure that we hear everything that God is saying for our good. And that we don't just hit the parts that me or Matt or Greg or anyone else thinks might be helpful. You don't really want to hear what I have to say. Trust me. If you're curious to learn more about what the Bible is and why Christians understand it the way they do, check out the new Sunday school class that just started at 9 a.m.

before the service downstairs in the fellowship hall. Well, 1 Corinthians 1, 1 through 9. Let's read this. Let me read this for us. And before we do, let's pray together. God, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this time that we get to attend to your word. Oh God, we pray that you would continue to show yourself faithful to speak to us through this word that you, Jesus, have given to your church. By your spirit, we pray that you would give us hearts that are receptive and understanding.

Lord, to truly behold you and your glory this morning. Amen. 1 Corinthians chapter 1. Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and our brother Sosthenes. To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any gift. As you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain us to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

[3 : 22] God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

He says, I can only answer the question, what am I to do? if I can answer the prior question of what story or stories do I find myself apart?

I can only answer the question, what am I to do if I can answer the prior question of what story or stories do I find myself apart? You remember J.R. Tolkien's great trilogy, The Lord of the Rings? Well, how does that story open? It opens with the hobbits, right? Living their simple lives in the shire, not really worried much about what's happening beyond their borders, happy to keep carrying on with life as usual, enjoying their long pipes and sharing their many meals and gossiping about their extended families, right?

But what they don't realize is that the shire is actually caught up, actually enmeshed in this larger story, this story of epic proportions, a story the unfolding of which will determine not just the fate of the shire, but the fate of everyone in Middle Earth.

[4 : 48] Tolkien's story is about one hobbit, or actually really a group of hobbits, right? Frodo and Sam and Merry and Pippin, this group of friends who together, as this epic story unfolds, begin to realize who they really are and what story they are a part of and what it is they have to do.

When the Apostle Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians sometime in the early 50s, he was writing to a church that had lost track of who they really were and what story they were really a part of, and so they had lost track of what it was they were meant to be doing in the first place.

Which is to say, they were experiencing the same danger that you and I face today. There are probably few books in the New Testament that feel as current or relevant as 1 Corinthians.

The church was dealing with all sorts of problems, and many of these feel immensely practical and even urgent to us today. Questions about worship, and questions about sex, and marriage, and singleness, and questions about our rights, and how do we express them, and do we give them up? There are even some in the church facing severe intellectual doubts about some of the core tenets of the faith, and we'll be walking through these issues one by one in the months to come, but maybe the primary reason why 1 Corinthians feels like such a practical book is because at the end of the day, it's all about being the church in the midst of a pragmatic, pluralistic, achievement-dominated culture just like ours.

[6 : 40] You see, friends, Corinth was the fast lane of the ancient world. It was a port city and an economic powerhouse. And because of its geography, it was a city where east and west met.

The main commercial shipping routes connected eastern and western ends of the empire that connected the eastern and western ends of the empire ran straight through Corinth. And so people of vastly different cultures, and classes, and languages, and religions all came there, and they all met there, and they all lived together.

Think of some of the world's fastest-growing cities today, like Dubai or Shanghai. Corinth was fast, and it was new, and most of all, it was where you went to make it.

If you wanted to climb the ladder and make a name for yourself, where did you go? You went to Corinth. And that's why 1 Corinthians is such a relevant book for us, and why we'll be spending such a big chunk of time studying it, because it teaches us not just what to believe about the gospel, not just to believe the gospel, but it teaches us how to live the gospel, and how to live the gospel in a world just like ours, where style often matters more than substance, and where what works often takes precedence over what's true, how to live the gospel in a world where the dominant plot line, the dominant shaping narrative of our lives basically says that the road to happiness is found through achievement and through fulfilling your desires.

And very interestingly, what we'll find along the way is that as each of these individual topics comes up, we'll see that Paul's response isn't so much like our response often is.

[8 : 43] Paul's response isn't, look, here's the rule book, just do it. No. Paul goes deeper than that.

He goes down to the heart. Yes, there are principles, and there are rules, and they're there for our good, but deeper than that, this book's going to remind us again and again and again not to forget who we are, and not to forget whose story we're a part of.

That's what Paul's up to even in these opening verses. Of course, on the surface, it looks like just a standard opening to a first century letter, right? You've got who it's from and who it's to, and then there's a nice little word of thanks before you really get down to business.

But you know, actually, when you look again, you realize that Paul has taken these first century conventions and used them. He's transformed them even into a vehicle for laying the groundwork of the whole letter.

As we'll see in a minute, almost every major theme is actually anticipated in these first nine verses. It's quite stunning. But more than that, right from the start, Paul's getting down to the heart of the issue.

[9 : 57] And as we've seen, this issue is our issue too. We face conflict and questions and doubts. We wonder what it is we're supposed to do. We wonder how exactly are we supposed to live.

But first, you have to remember who you are. And you have to remember whose story you're a part of. And so along those lines, there are four reminders in this passage about the real identity of the church of God.

Four things that are true about the community that God has called into the fellowship of his son, as verse nine says. So let's look through these one at a time. The first is that the church is sanctified in Christ.

Look again at verse two. To the church of God that is in Corinth. To those sanctified in Christ Jesus. Now sanctified is a word that needs some explanation, right?

Popularly when we hear language like sanctified and saint, which is from the same root word, we typically think of what? Someone who's really moral and really religious, right? Saints, after all,

they're the spiritual all-stars.

[11 : 06] They're up here. And then there's the JV squad of you and me, everybody else down here. You know, like you're not ever going to find a stained glass window of me in the back of the church.

Obviously that's not what Paul means here, right? Just start reading 1 Corinthians and you'll realize that that can't be what Paul means. This church is messed up. He's not saying, oh, you are the spiritual all-stars.

You get it all right. No, that's not what he means. So that popular meaning isn't exactly going to help us. So what does it mean? Well, in the New Testament, sanctification language is used in one of two ways.

Stick with me for a second. On the one hand, sanctification can be a process whereby we become more and more like Christ after we believe. That's sometimes called progressive sanctification. And that's how sanctification is often used in theological conversations, right? But, the New Testament will also talk about sanctification in another way. And this way is actually a lot more frequent in the Bible.

[12 : 17] It will use this word to describe what has happened to all believers once and for all through their union with Christ by faith. That is, in Christ, they have been utterly and completely cleansed of the guilt of sin.

And now, they are set apart for God's own purpose. This is sometimes what's called positional or definite sanctification.

You see, one of the ways that the Bible describes sin is as a stain. And doesn't that metaphor immediately ring true?

When you lie to someone, when you lash out in anger, when you give in to lust, you feel that, don't you? Like you're somehow dirty or unclean.

And that if someone would now look at you, really look at you, they might not like what they see.

And so, you feel shame, that sense of worthlessness and ugliness.

[13 : 29] And the worst of all is that these stains don't seem to go away. And so, we hide from one another. And we hide from God. But friends, here is the stunning good news of Christianity.

That God has made a way for us covered in stains to be clean again. You see, when Jesus died on the cross, he took the punishment for our sin.

And now, as the guilt is lifted from us through his cross, our stain of guilt is removed. Our record is now completely clean. Our stains are washed away.

And God demonstrates this, that our record has been made clean by raising Jesus from the dead. Maybe you're here and you're exploring Christianity. Maybe you came with a friend and you're wondering what Christianity is really all about.

Well, friend, this is it. That God, through Jesus, has done something for you to cleanse you of your guilt and shame and to bring you holy welcome to himself.

[14 : 44] In other words, Christianity is not at root about trying to clean up and do better. It's about trusting the one who has cleansed us by grace and giving your life wholly to him in love and in trust.

And then, watching him make you new. But you know, we need to remember that Paul is writing this letter to people who are already Christians, right?

That Christians, too, need to be reminded that we need to remember that we've been made clean in Christ and that God has set us apart for his own noble purpose in the world.

In chapters 5 through 7, Paul will return to this theme of holiness, of sanctification. And his argument there will be, don't you see? This is his argument.

Don't you see, friends, you've already been cleansed in Christ. All your guilt, all your shame, it's done with. Now, be who you are. Live the holy life that Christ has already welcomed you into.

[15 : 56] Let nothing of your past hinder you. In the early 18th century, the young Jonathan Edwards began keeping a notebook of theological reflections that he called that he called his miscellanies.

And he wrote something like 1300 of them in his life because he was a machine. And the very first one that he wrote was about this topic of holiness.

holiness is a most beautiful and lovely thing. It makes the soul like a delightful field or garden planted by God where the sun is Jesus Christ, where the blessed beams and calm breeze are the Holy Spirit, and where the sweet and delightful flowers are the Christian grises.

Christian, how do you view yourself this morning? A failure? A second rate follower of Jesus? Someone who's messed up so many times that you can't be of any real use to God? Friend, hear the word of God this morning that none of that is true.

[17 : 18] You are washed. you are sanctified. You are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. That's what Paul will say in chapter 6 verse 11.

First and foremost, that's who you are. And God has a glorious purpose for you. The next thing that Paul wants to remind us of is that we're not just sanctified in Christ but we're also united with a worldwide movement.

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

Paul is saying lift up your gaze for just a moment. Lift up your eyes from your local concerns and the petty squabbles that you're having with each other and realize that you're a part of something so much bigger and so much broader.

Do you see what it does when you remember that we as the church are part of a global worldwide international movement of God? Puts things in perspective doesn't it?

[18 : 40] In chapters 1-4 of 1 Corinthians Paul is going to tackle this issue of church unity and jealousy. There are divisions growing in the church. People are saying I follow this leader and I follow that leader and that makes me pretty much better than you.

And Paul is saying it's such a small and petty understanding of what it means to be the church. You are part of a global family of faith.

Bigger than any one leader. Certainly bigger than any one congregation. Why are you trying to puff up your own ego and grow your own little tribe when there's a worldwide advance of the gospel happening as we speak?

That God's glory is spreading to the ends of the earth. That people are calling on the name of the Lord Jesus in every corner of the globe. Friends, catch a vision.

Catch a vision for extending his kingdom globally instead of spreading your own petty little fiefdom in Corinth or in New Haven or wherever you may be.

[19 : 58] Lift up your eyes and lose yourself in a mission that is as big as the world. Remember that you belong to a global movement.

Let's keep going and look at the third thing. Paul wants us to remember about who we are. He wants us to remember that we are a people who are not just sanctified, not just worldwide, but are enriched by grace.

Pick up at verse 3. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus. that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you so that you're not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now perhaps the first observation to make here is that for all the problems in Corinth, Paul could still be genuinely thankful to God for them. Isn't that amazing?

[21 : 02] Of course there may be a hint of irony here. We'll learn later in chapters 12 through 14 that the Corinthians use or their misuse of their so-called spiritual gifts was actually causing some problems.

I'm so thankful that you're so enriched Corinthians. But even if there is a hint of irony I still think Paul is giving genuine thanks. Which is a lesson for us isn't it?

Even if things aren't exactly how you wish they were in your marriage or in your friendships or in your small group or in your church family for all that isn't there still ample room for thanksgiving? Are you thankful friends for what is rather than being simply critical of what is not? And Paul here thanks God for what?

For the grace they've been shown. And that grace enriches them in every way he says. And of course grace by definition is something you don't deserve.

[22 : 14] It's a sheer unmerited gift and we too need to remember that today. That it's grace not our own doing that brings us to God.

And that means that our life together as a church grace enriched grace enriched should not make much of ourselves but should make much of Christ the giver of the grace.

That's what Paul's getting at in verse six isn't he? They've been given these gifts of speech and knowledge not to demonstrate how great and spiritual they themselves are but in order to confirm the testimony the message about Christ and to display how great he is.

Remembering this grace will cause us to exalt Christ all the more and especially when remember that it's not a miserly grace that God extends. He's not sort of doling it out quarter by quarter.

Now he enriches us. He lavishes us. There's no lack of grace. It's an abundant grace that he pours out. A grace that saves us and then equips us to do his work and to make much of Jesus.

[23 : 26] And when we remember that we're recipients of grace it also does this. It produces in us a love for one another. After all doesn't grace mean nothing more than that we've been loved with an undeserved love?

And when that hits home, when it hits home that you have been loved with an undeserved love, you will in turn love others.

Especially when you realize that those others are loved by Christ himself. Loved ones for whom he died so that he might extend them grace. You know, in fact, it's a bit odd, isn't it?

It's a bit odd when you sort of compare this to Paul's other letters that love isn't mentioned here, isn't it? Most other churches that Paul writes to, he gives thanks for the love that they show.

But in Corinth, there's a strange silence. In this thanksgiving, love is absent. When you read ahead, it begins to make sense.

[24 : 41] Eventually, you come to 1 Corinthians 13, the famous love chapter that we've all heard read at weddings, right? Actually, a friend of mine told me a funny story once.

This isn't in my notes, I'm going to share it anyway. A friend of mine from Australia where they don't really know the Bible that well was at a wedding and the person was supposed to read 1 Corinthians 13, but the reader wasn't really familiar with the Bible, so they ended up reading 1 Chronicles 13.

That was pretty awesome. But you know, when you read 1 Corinthians 13 in context, in the context of chapters 12 and chapters 14, what do you realize?

You realize that 1 Corinthians 13 isn't sort of commending the Corinthians for their great display of love. It's this scathing critique for their lovelessness.

the most essential thing, he says, you're totally missing. And that's the problem. And you know, if we tie that later critique back to this strange absence in these opening verses, we can guess that their lovelessness was due to the fact that the Corinthians had forgotten about grace.

[26 : 00] Paul is reminding them and us that the spiritual gifts they had and everything else that they've received were just that, gifts. Gifts to be used in the service of love.

And briefly, before we move to our final point, do you see why this is why we can't celebrate grace enough as a church? Because if we really internalize this biblical grace, that is the costly fulfilling the law in my place, unmerited grace of Jesus Christ, if we get that, we will be a loving church. Preaching and believing real gospel grace won't make us lazy, it won't make us indifferent to good works, just the opposite. It'll make us people who actually love. And love will motivate all kinds of good works.

grace. Remember who you are, friends. Sanctified, worldwide, grace lavished.

And the last point that Paul drives home is an extension of that grace and love. We need to remember last of all that we're a people headed towards a future full of hope.

[27 : 17] Let's pick up in verse seven. So that you're not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is faithful by whom you were called into the fellowship of his son, Jesus Christ our Lord. As the church, we look forward to the future, not with fear, not with worry, not with anxiety, but with confidence.

Why? Because we know that the God who created all things will one day triumph in righteousness over sin and death and brokenness and that Christ will return in glory and be the perfect judge and he will put all things right.

And the church looks forward to that day with confidence because as Paul says here, he will sustain us to the end. And because of Christ's death and resurrection for us, there will be no charge on that day to be laid against us.

Those who have put their trust in Christ, those who are found in him. Because any charge, any condemnation has already been removed by the cross once and for all.

[28 : 33] And the verdict on that day, when our lives are laid open before him, the verdict for those who are in Christ, Paul says here, will be guiltless, innocent, accepted, approved.

Of course, the idea of a final judgment may seem more than a bit strange to you. But think about it, friends, could there be any greater affirmation of the value and meaningfulness of this life?

You and I live as if the things we do matter, as if they make a difference, as if they're not just absurd blips on the ways of cosmic nothingness. We go to work, we build relationships, we dream and plan, we laugh and we grieve.

To believe in a God who judges perfectly in the end is to believe that every single moment of your life is charged with significance and that no second of your life is a waste, that it all, all of it matters to God in the end.

And besides, if what the Bible says about God's creative work is true, that he made us and loves us and orders all things for his glory, is it so hard to believe that he will put things right in the end?

[30 : 04] That he will value and dignify his creation by affording it his perfect regard and perfect justice? You know, there's one way to show someone that you don't like them.

It's not to correct them. It's not to judge them. It's not to consider them. It's to ignore them. Friends, God loves the world too much to ignore it in the end.

So friend, how will you stand before God on that day? When your life is laid open before him?

When he affords you the dignity of you in your whole life? How will you stand before him? Are you going to stand in your own shaky righteousness?

Are you going to stand in your own record? Are you going to say I tried? Are you going to stand in Christ?

[31 : 13] The one who has become for us, Paul will say, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. The one who becomes for us a perfect record and a perfect righteousness.

And friends, if you're standing in that day is Christ, then you look forward to the future with hope. In chapter 15, Paul will return to this theme of hope as he draws his whole letter together.

And he there will show us how the Christian understanding of the future is more glorious than anything anyone has conceived ever before. God's faithfulness and our fellowship with his son, as he says in verse 9, all that will mean that even in God's redemptive consummating work, that even our material bodies will be rescued from death and liberated from decay on the day when Christ returns in glory.

And if you think that that element of our identity in Christ doesn't affect how we live now, friends, keep coming back because the hope of the resurrection changes everything.

So this is who we are. The sanctified, worldwide, grace-enriched, hope-filled church of God.

[32 : 48] But as much as who we are, perhaps it's most important to see whose we are. And it's obvious, isn't it? Ten times in nine verses, who is the center of this passage?

To whom does the church belong? To the Lord Jesus Christ. It's really his story that matters the most. The true story of God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, taking on flesh for us and for our salvation to fulfill all the promises God made to Israel, to be crucified for sinners, to be risen in power, to ascend to the Father's right hand, to pour out his spirit, to call the world to himself in grace, and to come again in glory to make all things new.

His is the story of which we find ourselves apart. What does it mean to live the gospel? What does it mean to have our lives replotted, reshaped around his?

That's what 1 Corinthians is all about. Yes, it's about unity. Yes, it's about holiness. Yes, it's about love. Yes, it's about hope. But ultimately, it's about him. Living in fellowship together with Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Put yourself in that story. Put yourself in the story of grace, the story of the world headed towards justice, the story of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Put yourself in that story, and you will never be the same.

[34 : 28] And our church will never be the same. Let's pray. God, thank you for your word and its clarity.

And God, how you remind us of all that we have in Christ. Lord, I pray that as we meditate on these first nine verses in the coming week, that the picture of who you've made us in him will stretch us and cause us to be in awe and give us great confidence and hope in the world in which we live.

