

“Lacking Nothing”

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1 Corinthians 1:1-9

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

HELP US ACCEPT EACH OTHER

How do you see yourself?

How would you describe yourself to someone who didn't know you?

Your self-image is very important.

If you think that you are lacking in some way, then that will be a roadblock to you having positive relationships with other people.

You will tend to live down to your poor self image.

On the other hand if you have a positive self image you will tend to be confident and engaging.

And this will help you establish good relationships with others.

How you see other people is also very important.

If you look upon others with suspicion, if you are afraid of them, then again it will be very difficult to establish a positive relationship with those people. Those folks will tend to live down to your negative expectations.

Conversely, if you look upon others with a positive attitude, they will instinctively know that this is true. And those folks will tend to live up to your expectations.

This is especially true in the church.

Self-acceptance and acceptance of others is very important.

One of our hymns, Help Us Accept Each Other emphasizes this attitude.

And there's one line in particular that really helps me put this ideal into practice. That line goes,

"Teach us to care for people, for all, not just for some
... to love them as we find them or as they may become."

"To love them as they may become ..."
That's key.

Can we do that?

Can we love difficult people not for who they are but for whom they may become?

Can we look at ourselves and others not through the lens of what is but through the lens of what might be in Christ Jesus?

If we are to accept and forgive each other, we need to change our point of view.

We need to evaluate people through the lens of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Today's lesson is a good example.

PROBLEMS IN CORINTH

Paul spent some 18 months establishing at least two house churches in Corinth.

This was a long time for Paul to stay in one place, but these new churches in Corinth faced a lot of obstacles.

Corinth had two sea ports, and a major road.

It was a big, important city.

We might think of Corinth was an ancient New York City where the world and all its ideas came together.

It was a place of dynamic commerce, but it was also a place where people could get lost.

The gap between rich and poor, slave and free was especially great in Corinth.

Many of the first churches were formed by Jews.

These people knew the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures and shared a common morality.

But, the people in Corinth did not know God's Word at all. They worshipped many "gods", but they knew nothing of the one true God.

Some of the religious groups in Corinth endorsed practices that Jews would find immoral.

For example, in the marketplace meat was sold that had been offered to idols.

Sexual immorality was a part of religion as well as daily life.

So, when some of these Corinthians became Christians, they came with baggage.

There were conflicts between those who were rich and those who were poor.

Immoral sexual practices were openly accepted by some church members.

There were divisions in the church based upon allegiance to various charismatic leaders.

These divisions were so deep that some church members even brought their grievances to court.

Following the lead of mystery religions that were common in the region some claimed to have the secret truth about God, and they thought that their superior theology made them better disciples.

Some contended that they did not need to live a moral and holy life because they had this special knowledge about God and what God really wanted.

So, to summarize, the church at Corinth was divided.

They were divided over leadership.
They were divided over morality.

They were divided over theology.
They were divided over money and class.

And most of them were in no mood to hear what Paul had to say about their situation.

Most of them liked their church the way it was.

PAINFUL VISIT

But, Paul was not the kind of person who would allow them to go on with their immoral and unholy ways.

He confronted the Corinthians again and again.
His conflict with the church at Corinth was so strong that he would later describe one visit to that church as “painful”.

In fact this visit was so painful that he decided to delay another planned visit.

Some of you here today have served in leadership roles in the church, and you know what it’s like to make a painful visit to a church that has gone off the rails.

And if you try to help a church that is struggling, sometimes that church will suggest that you are the troublemaker. You folks from Presbytery are the one who are really causing the problem!

I must say that I have personally experienced this in my service to Presbytery, and it's not an easy experience.

When a group of people all say that you are the problem, you have a tendency to believe it ... or you become so angry at your persecutors that you say (like Paul did at one point) ... "Maybe I just won't visit those people again."

The great Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis identified this as the work of the devil in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*. In that book a devil named Screwtape writes letters to his nephew on earth named Wormwood.

Wormwood is sort of like a devil in training and he is charged with keeping a certain human being, his "patient" in the clutches of the devil.

(For those of you who have watched the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life* and the angel who needed to earn his wings, this story is sort of the negative version. Wormwood is trying to earn his pitchfork!)

Unfortunately, Wormwood was not doing so well as an apprentice demon.

His "patient" had become a Christian.

But, Uncle Screwtape has a suggestion.
Have this new Christian concentrate on the flaws of the human church.

He wrote, "Make his mind flit back and forth between an expression like the 'body of Christ' and the actual faces in the next pew."

This is a very potent ploy that is still used by the devil.

Most of the time, the "actual faces in the pews" do not look very saintly.

Many people quit attending the church or even renounce the Christian faith because of the hypocrisy that they see in the church.

They cannot see God working in the lives of those who surround them in the church.

They can only see their failings.

And then they reach the point that they cannot see God working in their own life either.

THE POWER OF GOD'S CALL

In order to prevent this from happening to us, I think we need to look at Paul's example in this passage.

There was a reason that Paul did not succumb to this temptation to give up on the Corinthians or his ministry.

Despite this painful struggle with the church at Corinth, Paul did not doubt himself nor did he abandon hope for this congregation.

What kept Paul strong when everything went wrong?
It was the call of God.

In the first line of this letter Paul remembers why he was doing what he was doing.

He describes himself as,

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God ...”

On the road to Damascus, on the way to persecute the church, Paul was called by God. He was confronted by the risen Christ and that turned him around. He went from being the chief persecutor of the church to being the chief evangelist of the church.

This happened not because Paul was such a good theologian or a good man.

His theology and his sense of what was right had caused him to do the wrong thing.

(He even participated in the stoning of an early disciple named Stephen.)

But, the power of God in Christ turned Paul inside out and upside down.

He became a new man because of this call.

And it was important for Paul to remember this when things looked dark, and people were criticizing his actions in such a destructive way.

He was called by God.
And that made all the difference.

“SAINTS”

That changed the way Paul looked at himself, and it changed the way Paul looked at others.

This is the reason Paul would not abandon the Corinthian church.

He believed in the power of God’s call.
He accepted the Corinthians not as the people they were but as the people they would become.

In fact, Paul describes the Corinthians as “saints”.

Nothing in any of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians suggests that this congregation was “saintly”, at least in the way we use that word. If there was a mistake that could be made, the Corinthian congregation made it.

But, the Bible uses the word “saint” in a way that is different from how we use the word.

A saint is not a perfect person who has done three miracles.

A saint is an imperfect person who has been called by God.

In fact the word we translate “church” is the Greek word, “ekklesia” which can be literally translated, “those who are called out”.

The church is a group of people who (like the apostle Paul) have been called by the will of God. The church is those people who have been called by God out of the old way of life in order to live in a new way.

Why are we here today?

Because God has called us.

God has called us to a new way of life, a way of life that is defined by the power and presence of the risen Christ.

Do we always live like people who have been called by Christ?

No.

But, the good news is this: God isn't finished with us yet.

Paul believed that God wasn't finished with the Corinthians yet either.

In fact, he could imagine a time when these Corinthians would be "blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In other words, Paul envisions these Corinthians at the final judgment day being a part of the heavenly kingdom. Considering the lifestyle of many in the Corinthian church, that statement required a lot of imagination!

But, Paul had personal experience with such things.

He had been totally changed by the risen Christ.

And he believed that this was possible for others as well.

SANCTIFICATION

This kind of holy imagination is important for all of us as we serve in an imperfect church.

Paul holds out hope for the Corinthians not because of who they are but because of God is.

He suggests that their story is not over.

By the grace of God they have more to learn.

And by the grace of God we have more to learn as well.

Our story is not over either.

There are pages yet to be written in the drama of our salvation.

Paul tells the Corinthians that they are undergoing a process, and that process is called sanctification. They are being sanctified or purified through the knowledge of the truth that they receive in Christ Jesus.

TRANSFORMED BY GRACE

What is this truth that can change Corinthians into Christians?

What is this truth that can change us from the people we are into the people we are called to be?

The power of God's grace.

Paul said that the Corinthians had been given the "grace of God in Christ Jesus."

In other words, they have been forgiven.

They have been forgiven not because of who they are but because of who God is.

This is the first and best spiritual gift we receive when we are called by God.
Grace.

Christians aren't perfect, but they are forgiven.

But, this gift of forgiveness ... like every spiritual gift ... comes with responsibility.

We have to pass it on.

The gift of forgiveness requires us to be forgiving toward others ... to forgive others even as God has forgiven us, ... to be gracious toward others as God has been gracious toward us.

The Corinthians had forgotten that part.
And often so do we.

But, we cannot encourage people to be forgiving by beating them over the head with their failures or just talking about forgiveness.

We encourage others to be forgiving by example.
Grace is not a theological concept.
Grace is a way of life.

Each week we say it because we need to hear it.
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
And that forgiveness frees us to live in a way that is different from the ways
of the world.

Notice this week how politicians seek to place blame on others for what-
ever goes wrong.
There is no forgiveness in the world.
Placing blame is the way the world works.

But, in the kingdom of God, grace, forgiveness is the foundation for our life
together.

Forgiveness calls us out of the world of self-interest and blame.

And forgiveness calls us into the kingdom of God
... where love of God and neighbor become the norm.

The Corinthians knew this.
They had experienced this.
That's why they were a part of the church in the first place.

But, when Paul wrote his letter, they weren't putting that knowledge into
practice.

When things are going smoothly in a church it is easy to see the church as
strong and faithful.

On the other hand, when things are not going so smoothly in a church,
there is a tendency to blame the problems on poor leadership or members
who are not committed.

We may say that this problem church doesn't have the vision or the gifts to
really do the job.
Maybe they ought to just step out of the way and let a more faithful commu-
nity take over.

I certainly think that churches can lose their way.
That happened to the church at Corinth.
And that happens to almost every church at one time or another.

But, I firmly believe that God doesn't want us to give up on people.
God calls us to see people as what they might become.

After all ... All of us are sinners.
But, we are sinners saved by grace.
And that grace gives us all that we need for the days ahead.

Paul told the Corinthians that they lacked nothing.
They had every spiritual gift.
They had God's grace.

And dear friends, the same is true for us.

How does the song, Amazing Grace put it?
Grace has brought me safe thus far ...
And grace will lead me home.

Amen.