

## "Foundations of Spiritual Maturity" 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

### Introduction

- I've only been admitted to the hospital one time in my life. One year, right around Christmas time, in fact it was during a Christmas party my parents were hosting, I began to complain to my parents about a sharp shooting pain in my abdomen. At first it started out as just a mild cramp. But as the night progressed the pain got worse and worse. It got so bad I eventually crumpled to the floor right in the living room in front of the guests doubled over in pain. My parents helped me limp to my bedroom to lie down. The pain got worse. One of our neighbors, Alan Zobay, who was a physician, happened to be at the party and rushed upstairs to try to figure out what was wrong. After a few minutes of questioning and some prodding he's fairly certain it's acute appendicitis. He thinks I need surgery that night. Right away. I remember barely making it to the car and driving to the hospital with every bump causing me to wince in pain and trying to prepare myself to have surgery that night.
- We get to the hospital; the attendants put me on a gurney and wheel me into the emergency room where immediately the doctors order x-rays. The x-rays show nothing. No appendicitis. So they do a blood test and find out my white blood cell count is off the chart indicating some kind of infection. But as the testing continues the doctor can't find a thing wrong with me. I've only been admitted to the hospital one time in my life and do you know what it was for? This is so embarrassing. Gas.
- The church in Corinth that Paul is writing to is sick. Not some pseudo sickness but really ill. They really are sick. This church is unhealthy. Yet they thought they thought of themselves as the model church. In our day and age, if you were to visit a church like the Corinthian church you'd be impressed. Great worship. Eloquent speakers. But underneath—at the very heart and soul of the church—it's diseased. And the cause of their illness? Paul diagnoses it easily enough in chapter 3, verse 1. Their immature. The root cause of all the problems plaguing the Corinthian church was an underlying spiritual immaturity. Flip ahead to 3:1. *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.*
- The remarkable thing about the Corinthian church was that they were incredibly gifted from a spiritual point of view. Talk about a signs and wonders church. But in spite of their gifting Paul calls them worldly and immature. Just think about that for a second; impressive demonstrations of the Spirit of God and yet Paul calls them worldly. *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ.* They were convinced they were spiritual but Paul says no. He calls them babies. They are dysfunctional because they are immature.
- Funny thing about immaturity is that you hardly ever realize you're immature. It's not until you've matured that you can look back and say oh, I was pretty immature back then. Paul can't come right out and say to the Corinthians—hey babies—grow up. It's not until chapter 3 that he calls a spade a spade. So what he starts to do in verse 4 is lay the foundation for their maturity. He starts with the basics.

## Transition

And what he tells them and us starting in 1 Corinthians 1:4 is that...

## Proposition

- **The maturity of the church depends upon the grace of Jesus Christ**

## Transition

What is remarkable about this passage this morning is that Paul gives thanks to God for the very things in the church, that because of the abuses, are also causing him grief.<sup>1</sup> He starts by giving thanks for the grace that is given them in Christ Jesus. *Verse 4. I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.* And then he elaborates and describes...

## Organizational Sentence

- **Three results of the grace of Jesus Christ**
- This morning we are going to examine the first of the three results of God's grace. We'll go over the second and third results next week. If you were to summarize in one word what it means to be a Christian, it'd be the word grace. How do you even begin to describe God's grace? What is God's grace? More than anything, God wants you righteous. He made you. He expects you to be like him in every way. Did you know that? But the great tragedy of the human story is that what God wants, our perfection, is simply not in us to give. Our lives are too messed up for us to ever clean up on our own. Our dirtiness is more than skin deep, it goes down to our souls. And the just thing for God to do because of our condition is for him to give us what we deserve. And the bible says that the just punishment for our condition is death. We deserve death. It's hard to imagine that a loving God would in fact hand out that kind of sentence. But he does so not because he is a cruel and vindictive God but because our condition is really that awful.
- And God keeps his promise. Humanity's blackness is punished. But not in the way you'd expect. All the punishment that is reserved for you and me is put on Jesus Christ. Jesus, not us, becomes the object of God's punishment. He bears the brunt of God's anger toward sin on the cross. And when God is finished punishing Christ in the way that you deserve and I deserve, in the end there is no anger left in him to punish you or me. Christ receives the punishment that was meant for you and for me.
- And in the shadow of the cross, this drama of death, a transaction that takes place—like funds being wired from account to account. Christ not only receives our punishment but we receive something of his in return. The bible says that in place of punishment we are freely offered the righteous perfection of Christ. Christ gets our punishment. We get his righteousness. Pretty sweet deal, huh? God expects us to be like him in every way. Is it possible to do on our own? No. But he makes it possible through the cross of Christ. That is God's grace. God's grace is his act of clearing us, declaring us innocent from all wrongdoing by the death of Jesus Christ. Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve, the spotless, sinless, righteous perfection of Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Fee, p. 36.

Christ. It is a gift. It can't be earned. It can only be received. Have you received his grace? It's yours. All you have to do is ask.

### Main Points

- When Paul talks about grace in verse 4, this is what he's talking about. *I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.* The Corinthians accepted this message of God's grace. They eagerly received it. They are Christians. But they're extremely immature from Paul's perspective. Why? Because maturity depends upon a growing, a deepening understanding and application of this grace of Jesus Christ. The maturity of the church depends upon the grace of Jesus Christ.
- God's grace is like mining for gold. You may scratch the wall of the cave to reveal a thin vein of gold and become fabulously rich. But it takes a lifetime to mine the entire cave. Paul says in verse 5 that the church has been enriched in every way by the grace of Jesus Christ through the spiritual gifts he's given them. That, by the way, is the **first result** of God's grace. **The enrichment of spiritual gifts.** Look at **verse 5.** *For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge.* They've found the cave. They've even struck gold. God's grace has come to them and manifested itself in terms of spiritual gifts—Paul here singles out two of those, speaking in tongues and prophecy. We'll talk about what these mean later on in 1 Corinthians. But suffice to say right now that in spite of their rich gifting, despite the embarrassment of riches resulting from God's grace; they're immature because they've stopped mining.
- What this means for us as a church is very simple. Whatever gift mix God has given this church is secondary to the grace that supports those gifts. Let me say that again. Whatever gift mix God has given this church, and I would say we are a gifted church, those gifts are secondary to the grace supports those gifts. The problem in the Corinthian church was that the expression of what church was all about had become all about the gifts. It had become a dog and pony show revolving around the dog, skilled orators delivering eloquent rhetoric, and the pony, miraculous gifts. Paul reminds them that that's an immature perspective to take. It's not all about the gifts. Rather, it's all about the grace because without the grace there would be no gifts.
- The thing to watch out for as we grow and mature as a ministry is the elevation of a gift or gifts within the church so that the grace of Christ is shrouded by those gifts. Any gift can become too dominant. Grace doesn't serve magnify the gift; the gift serves to magnify the grace. The operative controlling influence in any church should be the grace of Christ. The gifts should point to the grace.
- Let me share a negative illustration with you as to how this can play out in the life of a church hindering its maturity. Shortly after we moved to Chicago to attend seminary Miriam and I visited a church with friends on several occasions. This church was known for valuing theology—doctrine, which should be valued. That's good. I thought I was going to love this church. There were a number of gifted theologians in the church and the ministry of the church reflected the gifting of its leaders. It was theology all the time. The preaching was very theological. The men got together on Wednesday morning to talk theology. But the weakness of what was happening became evident in the fact that theology was so highly valued that

everything else was swallowed up by it—including the cross. The same can happen in a church that is gifted with musicians or preaching or healing or administration or leadership or teaching. Ultimately, it's not about the gifts. It's about the grace that is given to us in Christ Jesus.

- As we move forward as a church let me remind encourage and challenge you to be about one thing and one thing only—the grace of Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

- In his book *Good to Great* Jim Collins tells the story of Dave Scott, a disciplined world-class athlete who has won the Ironman Triathlon six times. In training, Scott would ride his bike 75 miles, swim 20,000 meters, and run 17 miles—on average every single day. In no way did Dave Scott have a weight problem yet this man believed that a low-fat, high-carb diet would give him an extra edge. So, what did he do? Believe it or not this guy, who burned at least 5,000 calories a day in training, would literally rinse his cottage cheese to get the extra fat off.<sup>2</sup>
- If we are going to mature as a church we have got to rinse our cottage cheese. If we are going to mature as a church it's going to require us becoming obsessed, fanatical, and extreme about the grace that freely comes to people through Jesus Christ. It's about the grace of Christ. Let's rinse some cheese. It's about the grace of Christ. *And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*<sup>3</sup> Pray with me.

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:6-7