

## 1 Corinthians - How to be truly thankful for a messed up Church

I titled this sermon “How to Be Truly Thankful for a Messed Up Church” because that’s really what we see here in this opening prayer that Paul gives for the church in Corinth. Most of us know at least some of the problems that Paul will be dealing with in the coming chapters. And yet here, at the very beginning, he opens with this profound prayer of thanks to God for this church.

And as I was studying this week I thought, how is that possible? How is it possible that Paul is thankful for this church that has a myriad of problems? I don’t think he’s faking the prayer, I don’t think he’s lying to them about his thankfulness. Every indication we have here is that he is genuinely thankful for them. How is that possible? I think actually within the prayer itself, we see how it is that he’s thankful for them.

And I think this is crucial for us to understand because every church - to some extent - is messed up. Our church is messed up. We have our own issues and difficulties. Other churches are messed up - they have issues that they’re dealing with. No church is perfect, no church is even close.

Why is that? Well, it’s not a newsflash, but every person in every church is a sinner. No one has arrived, no one has attained perfection, or ever will. And because a church is the gathering of regenerate **sinners**, we will collectively never arrive, we will collectively never attain perfection. There will always be some area where we could use improvement, always be some area where there is difficulty.

Military unit throughout history, including the Marines, have as their motto the Latin phrase: Semper Fi. What’s that mean? Always faithful. The idea is that no matter what, they will be faithful to their mission and country.

The reformers also had a motto: Semper reformada. It means always reforming. What does that mean? It means that the church is in a constant realignment process with the truth. We never arrive, we never finish our battle with sin, we never get it all correct this side of heaven. And so we are Semper reformada: always reforming. Always seeing to align our lives and hearts with the Word of God - that reform will never finish this side of heaven

My kids have these remote control cars they drive around and bump into stuff. And it seems like they are constantly adjusting the alignment on these cars. In fact, even when they don’t bump it seems like you have to adjust the alignment. That’s how we are. We are in constant need of adjustment and alignment back to the truth.

That reality could cause a lot of frustration. You could just be irritated all the time at the church for its lack of perfection. But that’s not a godly response. You could also give up on church because they’ll never get there - but that’s not an option either. I’ve met a lot of people who gave up on churches because they just can’t find one that’s perfect. They would have given up on every church Paul and Peter and Barnabas and John planted because none of them are perfect.

And if you asked them they would say “Well, we don’t need perfect, but what we do need...” and then they list an impossible set of requirements for them to be willing to grace that church with their presence.

Churches are messed up, y’all. I wish it weren’t so, but they are. That is by God’s design. We never arrive, but we are always striving to be more and more faithful. And in the midst of that I think we see reasons to be thankful.

### 1) We can thank God for the Spiritual gifts he has given to the church. Read 4-7

Now, just reading the first couple of verses in this section it’s easy to get bogged down a little bit because Paul adds so much detail. So we’re going to unpack this slowly and touch on the details. But the overall gist is that Paul thanks God for gracing the Corinthian Church with all of their spiritual gifts.

In **Vs. 4** Paul says he thanks God for the grace he’s given to the church. Well, what grace is he talking about? Saving grace? No, that actually comes later in **Vs. 9**. The grace he has in mind here is grace of spiritual gifts in **Vs. 7**. But first notice **Vs. 5**. **Read 4-5**

The grace that God gave enriched them in speech and knowledge. Speech and knowledge are actually some of the spiritual gifts listed later in **Chap. 12** that the Corinthians had. And these spiritual gifts were actually a confirmation that they had become true believers. **Read 6**

Isn't that interesting? God gave this church spiritual gifts of grace - specifically speech and knowledge - and the fact that they had those gifts was a confirmation that they were in Christ.

How do you know if someone has become a Christian? How do you know if someone is truly saved? Well, the Bible actually tells us there are many ways to evaluate ourselves. What do we believe? Do we believe the true gospel? That God sent his Son to redeem repentant sinners who put their faith in him alone for their salvation? Well, that's a good test. But that's not all.

Someone could say they believe that but live a life of sinfulness. So another test is obedience. Is someone driving to be obedient to the Lord from the heart?

What about love? The apostle John says that someone's willingness to love their brother is a sign of conversion; and that someone refusing to love their brother is a sign they are not saved.

Well, Paul says that the spiritual gifts also operate as something of a confirmation of salvation. These gifts of speech and knowledge confirmed that the Corinthians were in Christ. The primary reason for spiritual gifts of all kinds - whether speaking in tongues or teaching or administration or encouragement or hospitality or serving - was to build up the church. But the side benefit is that they also served to help confirm that someone is in the faith.

You remember in **Acts 10** when Peter was preaching the gospel to Cornelius and his Gentile household? What happened when they believed? They started speaking in tongues. Why? What was the purpose? Well, in the next chapter Peter reports that he knew these Gentiles were genuine believers because they began to speak in tongues.

The point of speaking in tongues is not primarily to be able to say to people "Hey, I'm a Christian." But if you're genuinely speaking in tongues what can we conclude? That you're a Christian.

Actually the same thing happened in **Acts 19** in Ephesus: Gentiles became Christians and began speaking in tongues and prophesying and you know what the conclusion was? Oh, these are genuine believers. That's what Paul is saying in **Vs. 6**. You guys have been graced with gifts of speech and knowledge and that confirms you're in the faith. In fact, he makes it clear he's talking about spiritual gifts in **Vs. 7. Read**

So he makes it clear: God has graced this church with literally every possible spiritual gift - even knowledge gifts and speaking gifts. They were loaded. And Paul is genuinely thankful for that.

Now, you say, "Why is that a big deal?" It's a big deal because one of the biggest problems in this church is their abuse of spiritual gifts. Paul spends 3 whole chapters of the book rebuking the Corinthians for their inability to even conduct church in an organized way because they are clamoring over the top of each other with their gifts.

And yet, the very first thing he is thankful for here is what? Their gifts. Why is that. Because spiritual gifts, in and of themselves, are a good thing. Can they be abused? Sure. But are they given by God for a good purpose? Of course.

You know when you go in for an interview and they ask you one of the classic interview questions: What is your greatest weakness? And sometimes they'll ask you about your greatest strengths too. And oftentimes your greatest weakness is related to your greatest strength. "My greatest strength is I like working in teams. My greatest weakness is working on individual assignments." That kind of thing.

That's kind of what he's doing here. Paul praises God for this great blessing of these spiritual gifts. That is surprising because they are also the source of some of the greatest division in the church. Yet he is genuinely thankful that they have these gifts.

There are two things I think we can take away from this. First of all, whatever gifts a church has or doesn't have, have been given or kept by who? God. God gives all the gifts a church needs. And God withholds some gifts from some churches. That's okay. Paul will go on to say that who gets gifts is all up to the Holy Spirit, not us. So we can be thankful for the gifts God has equipped our church with, and we can be content when we don't have gifts that we might like.

Second, the gifts that we do have are good. We'll see this later in the book but if God has gifted you with something that can be used for his glory, you need to be using that for his glory. It doesn't do the Kingdom any good if God gives you gifts, desires, and skills that you don't use. It'd be like saying, "You know I'm just not going to use my right eye today. I'm going to tape that baby shut." Why would you do that?

No, God has given each person gifts to use for the up building of the church - we need to use them to further the Kingdom.

## 2) We can thank God that he has given us everything we need until the return of Jesus. **Read 7**

So two huge truths here: the central hope of the church is the return of Jesus. We are waiting for Jesus to return. Here, Paul says are awaiting the revealing of Jesus. Sometimes it's referred to as his coming, sometimes his sudden appearance, here it's the revealing. What does that mean?

Imagine there's this little table. And on the table is one of those snow globes with a little village in it. But over the snow globe is a sheet so you can't see the village. You know it's there, it's precious to you, but you're waiting for just the right moment to pull the sheet off for the revelation.

Well, the Bible says that we're actually the ones in the snow globe. And there's this sheet called the heavens all around us. And one day those heavens will be pulled back instantaneously and what will be revealed is Jesus in all of his glorious majesty coming on the clouds to rescue us from this present evil age. That's the revealing of Jesus.

When's that going to happen? We have no idea. But all of our activity and hope in this life is based on the truth that one day Jesus will be revealed. That's our hope.

And what Paul says to the Corinthians is that they have everything they need to operate until that day comes. They've been gifted to the hilt and so they have no lack.

This is true with every church, actually. Because it is the Spirit who sovereignly gives gifts to people, he sovereignly gives the gifts that each church needs until Jesus comes back.

Sometimes maybe we wish he would bestow us gifts or people who have different gifts or better gifts. But we can say - just like Corinth - that we have everything we need until the revealing of Jesus.

## 3) Thank God that he will sustain us to the end. **Read 7-8**

Remember that this whole section here is one big long list of why Paul is thankful to God.

And here we see that part of why he is thankful to God is because God will sustain these believers to the end. The end is the revealing of Jesus or here he calls it the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is what we often refer to as the perseverance of the saints. Or more accurately the preservation of the saints. That is, all those whom God has called to himself and saved he will for sure keep them in the faith. And on the last day - the day of Judgment or the day of Jesus - all those who have been mercifully saved by God will be guiltless.

These are some amazing truths and something we should be very thankful for. First of all this word sustain in the ESV or some of you have confirm means is the idea that what happened at the beginning of your salvation will be upheld until you see Jesus.

So when someone first comes to saving faith in Jesus - when they first truly trust in the death and resurrection of Christ alone to save them - what happens is that they are considered completely blameless in the sight of God. God no longer considers their sins, in fact, he looks at them as though they are as righteous as Jesus because Jesus's righteousness has been imputed to their account. That's happened to everyone who has faith in Jesus.

But here's what happens: life and sin. And the longer we trudge through life the less blameless we feel. We sin constantly, we fail constantly, our love for Jesus can grow cold, then warm then cold. And sometimes you start going "Was I really saved? Did God actually do a work in me?" Maybe you felt confident that God had imputed the righteousness of Christ to your account but now, years later and hundreds of sins later, maybe not so much.

You know what Paul says? God will sustain you to the end. Literally, he will confirm you. The same declaration of righteous that was applied to you the moment you believed is the exact same declaration of righteous you will hear when you stand before Jesus on the Day he comes.

Nothing changed. Nothing wavered. If you are in Christ now, when he appears, you will be found guiltless before him. Just like these Corinthians will be.

And if you think about it, that's pretty astonishing because these guys were anything but guiltless. They were involved in all manner of filthiness and sin. They were abandoning core truths. And yet Paul reassures them that they will be counted blameless. Why?

Because **God** sustains them. Listen, just like God sustains them, he sustains us. You will fail, you will sin, you will go through ups and down as you follow Christ, but we can thank God that by his sustaining power when we stand before Jesus at his coming will be counted blameless.

#### 4) We can thank God that he called us into this fellowship. **Read 9**

These two truths are connected. The God who sustains us is actually the God who called us into fellowship.

The calling that Paul has in mind here is what we refer to as the effectual calling. This is the internal work of God to bring a sinner to faith in Jesus.

There are two ways that the Bible uses the word call. There's what is often referred to as the universal call - the call to everyone who hears the gospel to repent and believe in Jesus. But there's also the effectual call which is the internal work of God to bring a sinner to saving faith.

When we say it is effectual what we mean is that it always works. Turn back to **Rom. 8** for a minute. This is called the Golden chain of redemption because it's a series of truths that are tied together regarding our salvation. And the chain we see is that God foreknew, then he predestined, then he called, then he justified, then he glorified. **Read 28-30**

So there's this chain. The chain begins with foreknowing. What is foreknowing? It doesn't just mean to know in advance. It's not just that God looked down through history and knew who would be saved. He did know, of course, but that's not what Paul is getting at.

Throughout the Bible when the word foreknowledge is used it refers to an intimate love for someone that causes them to act. So when someone goes to adopt a little boy or girl overseas oftentimes they receive a picture of the child before they get there. And there is a love the parent has even before they see the child. There's a love they have that causes them to act in the best interest of the child before they've even met the child. That's foreknowledge.

**Acts 2:23** says that Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. It's not just that God knew it was going to happen. The Father, in love, planned for his Son to be delivered up.

That foreknowledge gives way to predestination. **Read 29**

All the ones God foreknew he then predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. When will that ultimately happen? At the return of Jesus. God doesn't just want us in heaven - though he does. God wants us to be like his Son in holiness and righteousness.

So the chain goes foreknowledge - initial love - to initial determination in predestination. Then call. **Read 30**

This is the effectual call that he has in mind. If God has foreknown a person and predestined them, then he will call them. He will draw them into his Kingdom. Not against their will, no one goes into the Kingdom kicking and screaming. No, the idea is that God changes our desires. He implants in us a love and faith that we would never have on our own.

So think of when you came to faith in Jesus. What was it that you felt or experienced that brought you to the point of trusting in Christ? It's different for everyone. The road to salvation looks very different, even though the gospel message we believe is exactly the same. But whatever that experience was was the call of God on your life. It was him working in you to bring you to himself. That's the calling Paul has in mind in **1 Cor. 1**. That effectual calling to bring someone into the Kingdom.

So God calls, then justifies. He declares us righteous. It's as though we are standing before a judge in a courtroom. And those who believe in Jesus are not simply declared not guilty. We are declared righteous - as though we've only ever done the right thing. Why? Because Jesus only ever did the right thing and his righteous life is what God sees when he looks at those who have faith in Jesus.

And all those he has foreknown, predestined, called, and justified he will glorify. **Read 30**

One day we will be completely like Jesus in holiness. Paul actually expresses this in an unusual way. He says all those who are justified are glorified. Past tense. Are we glorified now? No, of course not. Why does he use the past tense? Because that reality is as good as done.

**Back in 1 Cor. 1** the truth that Paul is emphasizing is the calling. The work of God in the hearts of those who have believed. Our calling is personal, it's special. Even if you don't remember it all that well. Why is it personal and special? Well, of all the aspects of the golden chain of redemption it's the one we have experienced personally.

We weren't around for the foreknowing and predestining. We didn't literally stand in a courtroom to hear the word "justified" declared on our account. And we haven't experience glorification yet.

The one aspect we have experienced is our calling. Whatever God used to bring you to himself. The conviction of sin you had. The need for the sacrifice of Jesus. The desire to follow Jesus no matter what. The feeling of forgiveness and newness of life. That's all very personal.

And notice that the calling is into a personal relationship with God himself. **Read 9**

What does Paul say God called us into? Fellowship. Friendship with the Savior.

No matter how messed up our life is, if we've truly been called then we have intimate fellowship with the Savior through the faithful God.

Paul's point is that no matter how crazy things get - even in the local church - we have much to be thankful for. We have a lot to praise him for. He is merciful and good and uses us to advance his glory.

**Pray**