

First Sunday in Advent December 1, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Advent Reminds Us to Focus on God

1. His grace confirmed the gospel in us
2. His faithfulness will confirm us to the end

1 Cor. 1:3-9

NIV 1 Corinthians 1:3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5 For in him you have been enriched in every way-- in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- 6 because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our epistle lesson for this first Sunday of Advent, the opening verses of 1 Corinthians, is unique in all of Scripture. There is no other place in the Bible where the name of our Savior is referenced in nine consecutive verses as it is here in 1 Cor. 1:1-9. You don't have to possess great powers of deduction to see what's on the apostle Paul's mind as he begins this letter: the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a reason why the Spirit led Paul to refer to Jesus so often here. You might not know it from the verses in our epistle, but Paul had good reason to fear that the Corinthians were losing their focus on Christ. Their attention seemed to be directed at themselves and seeking their own advantage rather than on God. This loss of focus had resulted in all sorts of spiritual problems in Corinth. Behind Paul's record-setting string of references to Jesus is the belief that he is one on whom their focus must once again be directed.

We are entering a time of the year when it's notoriously difficult to stay focused on the whole point of the season. Advent aims to prepare us for Christmas by directing us to God's grace in keeping his promise to send a Savior. But very easily the focus can be misdirected to other things. We may be focused on the work before us, thinking mostly about how busy these next few weeks are going to be. Children may be focused on the gifts they expect to receive, rather than on the Giver of the greatest gift. Or we may even be focused on a negative, expecting that the Christmas holiday will be difficult, perhaps because someone we love is absent. That's why it's good right at the beginning of Advent to set our

sights on what's most important. Otherwise we might emerge on the other side of the Christmas season just relieved the whole thing is over, with little more to show for it than thinner wallets and thicker waistlines. To prevent that, our epistle encourages us to focus this Advent season on God, 1] whose grace confirmed the gospel in us, and 2] whose faithfulness will confirm us to the end.

1. His grace confirmed the gospel in us

After he greets the Corinthians, the first thing off Paul's pen is, "I always thank God for you..." That's remarkable! Given the serious problems in the church at Corinth—and the disappointment Paul must have felt at learning of those problems—it's remarkable that he begins his letter with an expression of thankfulness for the Corinthians. This was a congregation in conflict. There were doctrinal errors on issues as vital as the Lord's Supper and the Lord's resurrection. Christians were dragging fellow Christians into court. Sexual immorality was shrugged off with a thoroughly modern-sounding rationalization: It's my body; I can do what I want with it. There was blatant disregard for the poor, for the weak in faith, and for those caught in sin. It seemed as though this congregation was on the verge of disintegration.

And yet, Paul thanks God for them. *"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way..."* After you've taken note of the conflicts in the church at Corinth, the other thing that you can't help but notice is that this was a supremely gifted group of believers. Paul will say later, *"You do not lack any spiritual gift..."* Paul's summary here indicates that the gifts of the Corinthians fell primarily into two categories: speaking and knowledge. In chapter 12 Paul goes into more detail about the gifts in Corinth: prophetic messages of wisdom and knowledge, gifts of healing, miracles, miracle faith, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues and the ability to interpret tongues-speaking. By God's grace the church at Corinth was the Mother Lode of the Spirit's gifts.

The problem, though, was that the Corinthians didn't always think very carefully about why God had given them these gifts. They focused on the gifts, rather than on God who gave the gifts. This led some of the very gifted to brag about their gifts. It also led some of the less gifted to whine about feeling inferior. With selfish ambition reigning in place of Christian love, all this giftedness was about as harmonious as a clanging cymbal. So Paul works here to remind the Corinthians to focus, first, on God as the source of these gifts, and second, to focus on God's wonderful purpose in giving these gifts. He says, *"You have been enriched in every way... because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you."* God gave them these gifts not to start an argument, but to confirm Paul's testimony. Paul's testimony was about Jesus. He says in chapter 15, **"for what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."** (15:3-4) Then to confirm Paul's testimony, to give it added credibility, God gave the Corinthians

this tremendous wealth of spiritual gifts, gifts of speaking and knowledge. It's like it says in Hebrews: **“This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”** (Heb. 2:3-4) The theory was that the Corinthians would see all these gifts that accompanied their faith and be strengthened in the conviction that what Paul had taught them about Jesus was true. And even at Corinth, despite the problems, that was what happened.

I'm sure that what Paul says about the church at Corinth, he would also say about our church. *“You do not lack any spiritual gift.”* No, we may not have the miracle workers or the tongues speakers here because we no longer live in the age of the apostles, but we aren't impoverished when it comes to spiritual gifts, either. I think of St. Paul's gift list in Romans 12 where he includes gifts like prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing, leading, and showing mercy. We've got them all right here in our congregation. Besides having our Bibles, with which we can verify that the gospel message that is preached and taught here is true, we also have the confirming power of these gifts. God's promise of salvation in Jesus Christ is true and it works. It produces results as Christians here serve God and each other with their own unique spiritual gifts.

But we also have that old problem of losing the focus. Does worldly wisdom ever contaminate the thinking of believers here? Do personal differences ever threaten our blood-bought unity? Do we ever abuse Christian liberty or rationalize sexual immorality? Are we ever thoughtless or careless about the Lord's Supper? Do we ever think that our great gifts excuse us from dealing with each other in Christian love? Sadly, the answer to all these questions is Yes. And each time these things occur, it's an indication that we've gotten away from God. Whether my focus is on my own selfish and worldly ambitions, or on my own pain and sorrow, which, I'm convinced, will prevent me from experiencing the joy of Jesus' coming, both are misdirected.

Through his apostle, God calls us to focus on him, on his message of forgiveness and hope in Jesus Christ and on his goodness in enriching us with spiritual gifts. Paul's testimony about Jesus is that he died for our sins and rose from the dead and that he's coming again. Connected to Christ in Holy Baptism, we were washed, we were sanctified, and we were justified. The old is past. The new has come. When Jesus comes, we'll be like him and we'll see God as he is. With this glorious prospect lying in our future, it only makes sense to refuse to let either the cares and sorrows or the joys and pleasures of this life divert our attention from God. And there are benefits to this approach for this life, too. When our eyes are fastened firmly on Jesus, we'll be far less likely to wind up feeling defeated, depleted, and depressed this holiday season.

The word “advent” has a Latin root. It means “he is coming.” Later in Advent we hear of Jesus coming into our hearts through his Word and coming into human

flesh at his incarnation. But this first Sunday of Advent carries over some of the theme from the last Sundays of the old church year. The message is “He is coming in judgment.” Paul writes about this in the final verses of this section. *“Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.”*

2. His faithfulness will confirm us to the end

Depending on where you stand in regard to Jesus, the cry “Jesus is coming” can either strike fear in your heart or have you standing on tip-toe in eager anticipation. For us Christians, it’s the latter. The grace of God that for Jesus’ sake changed our status from sinner to saint, has also changed the character of the Last Day for us. What we anticipate is not an ordeal, but a vindication. In Christ Jesus we’ve already been declared not guilty. What we anticipate is seeing our Savior face-to-face and being reunited with our fellow believers. That’s why we “eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.”

But where does this confidence come from? How can we be sure that that Day will find us standing on the Lord’s right side and not on his left? It’s clear that Paul was concerned about where the Corinthians would end up on the Last Day. It was in genuine concern for the soul of a man caught in immorality that Paul in this letter encouraged the Corinthians to be faithful in carrying out church discipline, in his words, **“so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”** (5:5) A chapter later he warns that **“the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God.”** (6:9) And it’s here in 1 Corinthians that Paul issues that sobering warning: **“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”** (10:12) Maybe, in view of all this, we ought to admit that we don’t know what’s going to become of us on the Last Day.

But that’s not Paul’s tone when he writes here, *“He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Paul himself died in the confidence that there was in store for him a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, would award to him on the Last Day. He was confident of the very same thing for the Corinthians, despite their obvious struggles in the faith. What made him so confident? Was it some inner strength that he had discerned in the Corinthians? Was it a just powerful feeling that the Corinthians would come through when the chips were down? You can hear that that’s not his emphasis at all: *“He will keep you strong to the end...”* And in the final verse, *“God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”* It’s a matter of focus. If I focus on myself, with my weak and sinful efforts I will undoubtedly fall short of the goal and be ashamed and condemned on the Last Day. But when we focus on God, trusting that the one who called us into fellowship with his Son will faithfully meet our spiritual needs until the end, then we can rightly anticipate joy and glory on the Last Day.

So where's your focus? While we may look forward to the Christmas season, the church services, the family time, the social gatherings, it's probably also true that nobody past the age of 14 regards these as the carefree days of the Christmas season. There's a long list of things to be done. There are expectations to be met. And if we're not going to disappoint ourselves and others, we'd best get to it. Is that how you're thinking? Then be careful. Do not let the cares and obligations and pleasures of these busy days divert your focus from the God whose goodness we're celebrating. With his gifts he's enriched us and with his power at work in the Word and sacraments he'll keep us, so that the Last Day will be the day of the fulfillment of all our eager longings. Amen.