

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA
✠ Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost ✠
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Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“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—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

(1 Corinthians 1:4-9 NIV)

If you’re going to criticize someone, it sometimes helps to say something nice first. If you give someone a compliment before you bring a complaint, perhaps the person may be more inclined to listen to your concern. That kind word can act like a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Corinth, he had a few criticisms to make. There were things happening in Corinth among this body of believers that should not be happening in a Christian congregation – in their gatherings and their dealings with each other, and in their personal lives. And so Paul has to say something – and he did. But you might notice that Paul does not mention those things in the first nine verses of the letter. In fact, what he seems to do here is just the opposite.

Now, it was typical in those days, when writing a letter, to begin the letter with a paragraph of praise for the recipient. But that’s not really what Paul is doing here. He doesn’t praise the Corinthians. And he doesn’t really compliment them, either.

What Paul does is he gives thanks to God. And though we are separated from the Corinthians by many years, we today can and should join with Paul in **giving thanks to God for Jesus Christ – for gifting us with his grace, for strengthening us through his Word, and for keeping us ‘til he comes again.**

Paul writes, **“I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.”** Paul understood that he was writing to a gifted congregation. Again and again in this letter he refers to those gifts. They were smart, wise, eloquent. Some of them even had supernatural gifts such as speaking in tongues. Those were all wonderful gifts. But first and foremost Paul wanted them to understand their greatest gift: God’s grace.

Grace is God’s undeserved love for sinners. And that’s exactly what the Corinthians were. Paul had heard about the Corinthians. So Paul knew that they didn’t deserve God’s love. But as much as Paul knew the Corinthians, God knew them better. Paul had heard about a case of incest in the congregation. But God knew every lustful thought of each member. Paul may have heard about their disorderly worship, but God knew how many times each of them let their mind wander down sinful paths in church. Paul may have rightly been upset that this congregation which he founded could have had such problems, but just imagine what their God thought about their behavior and attitudes.

Now imagine what he thinks of our behavior! This holy God would have every right to be angry and upset and condemn us to hell. We would deserve exactly that.

But that's not God's attitude toward us. His real attitude toward us is not what we deserve. It's not anger, it's love. It's not wrath, it's grace. That's the gift God gave. He gave a gift that shows his attitude toward us. And that gift is his grace. He even wrapped it for us: **"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus."**

Jesus came to live out the Father's attitude toward us. Every step Jesus took was a step to show us the Father's love. Every word, deed, or thought of Jesus was done to actively fulfill God's demands when we could not. God was also giving his grace to us when Jesus passively allowed himself to be beaten and mocked and killed in our place, for our sins. Jesus Christ demonstrated and lived God's attitude of grace for us. Jesus gave his life – to gift us with God's grace.

Above all, that is what Paul thanks God for. That gift of God's grace was given to every member of the church in Corinth and it was given to every one of us. No exceptions.

But God wasn't finished there, and so Paul wasn't finished giving thanks. **"For in him you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge – because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed."** This doesn't sound like a description of weak Christians, does it? Paul says that when it comes to the gifts that God gives, they were rich. They weren't lacking anything. They could speak about their faith, and they had knowledge about their faith. But the question is this: How did this happen? How did the Corinthians get this way?

Have you ever seen or heard people marvel at the faith of others? Maybe someone admires the strong faith of a young child. Or maybe they think of a parent or a grandparent and they think, "Wow, I wish I had that kind of faith." I've seen that. But I've noticed that sometimes they talk about strong faith as if it is a mystery how that faith develops. Now, it is true that we cannot produce faith in our hearts. By nature, our sinful hearts are as unable to produce or increase faith as a dead person trying to walk. But it's no secret how that faith is produced and how it grows. Paul knew that. The Corinthians were richly blessed with faith **"because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you."**

The Corinthians had faith because of the testimony about Christ. It was because through the apostles they heard the words of Jesus. They heard about Jesus and what he had done for them. They listened to the Old Testament, which Jesus called the **"Scriptures which testify about me."** That's how faith comes. When Paul wrote to the Romans he put it this way, **"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ."** And this same message also strengthens faith. (And Paul says) it was confirmed in you. It was placed as the very foundation of your life. As you listened to it and learned from it, your faith became stronger.

It's no secret how faith grows. It grows through regular contact with the Word of God. When a pastor makes a sick call on an elderly member and they display a strong trust and faith in the Lord of their life even in the shadow of death; when an adolescent walks into confirmation class and is able to confess trust in Jesus their Savior; or any other number of examples of enriched lives of faith – it's not because the person was smart, or was just a better person. It is because the person has been in regular contact with God's Word. It's the adult who made the study of God's Word a regular habit. It's the child who came to know Jesus at home and was reinforced in the Word in Sunday School or other forms of Christian education.

And so Paul give thanks to God for strengthening the Corinthians through his Word. And at the same time it was a reminder for them – and for us – to continue to grow and be strengthened in that Word.

I suspect that Paul wrote this letter with a bit of a heavy heart. With all the things he had heard from Corinth and considering his deep love for these people whom he had served, he had to be wondering what was going to happen to them. Would these divisions rip apart the congregation? Would the immorality that was in their society and which was starting to creep into their congregation completely overtake them? If it were me, I wouldn't have been very excited to write this letter and not terribly optimistic about the results.

But in these words Paul displays a confident outlook. His confidence is not really in the Corinthians; it's in God. **"Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."** Paul gives thanks to God that in Jesus Christ he will keep the Corinthians strong right to the end. God is going to continue to strengthen them through his Word every day of their lives. They will live their lives in faith and eagerly wait for Jesus to return. When Jesus does return, or when they die and then stand before the throne of God, God will consider them blameless, perfect, and holy.

You might think to yourself: "How is this possible?" How could Paul be so confident that these believers would stay believers? How could he be so sure that they wouldn't fall away? (After all, later in this letter he was going to warn them that they could fall.) The answer is found in the last verse of this text, where Paul writes, **"God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."** Paul was not confident in the actions of the Corinthians. He wasn't hopeful in their faithfulness. He trusted in the One who is faithful. God is faithful. God is faithful, because he **"called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord"** The relationship you have with Jesus Christ was God's doing. He established it.

For many of us that relationship was created when water was applied to our head and according to God's promise we were united with him. He called us his own and cleansed us from sin. And no matter what happens, God never takes away the promise he gives in Holy Baptism. Paul expressed this same confidence when he told the Philippians that **"he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ."** God "will keep you strong to the end."

And as if his promises in baptism were not enough, God has given us another gift to strengthen us 'til he comes again. Later in this letter, Paul wrote that **"whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."** That bread and wine is Jesus' very own body and blood, which he died to give to you. As a visible and tangible proof of Jesus' forgiveness, this meal also serves (as we say at the end of the meal) "to strengthen and preserve you in the true faith unto life everlasting." This is not just a wish. It is the promise of God to keep you in faith until the end.

It's no wonder, then, that Paul gives thanks. It's not even that surprising that he gives thanks when the situation is as bad as it was in Corinth. We give thanks (just like Paul), not for what we have done or what we are doing or what we will do. We give thanks to God for what he has done. We give thanks to God for Jesus Christ. Did you notice how many times Paul uses the name "Christ" in these verses? It's 5 times in just 6 verses. It is in Christ that God has given us his gift of grace – his undeserved love for us. It is in the Word of Christ that he creates and strengthens faith in our hearts to receive God's gifts. And in Jesus Christ God has promised to keep us, to continue to strengthen and preserve us until the very end, until that glorious day when Jesus comes from the heavens in glory and majesty. Or until that day when you are called to be him in paradise, to stand before the throne of God and then, for all eternity, with all the hosts of heaven, give thanks to God for Jesus Christ. Amen.