**HEALTHY CHURCHES REMEMBER**

**(1 Corinthians 1:1-9)**

One day a seminary student asked his professor, “Don’t you think we need to get back to the first century church?” Being the good teacher that he was, the prof answered the student’s question with a question. He asked, “Which first century church?”

There were many first century churches, and none of them were the same. In Revelation 2-3 Jesus dictated separate letters to seven churches. None of the messages were the same because none of the churches were the same. Each church faced its own challenges, received different praise and were given rebuke for its own specific failures.

Nine of Paul’s 13 letters were addressed to 7 different churches—the churches of Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and Thessalonica. In his letters, Paul had various goals because those churches had various needs. Some churches needed further instruction. Some needed encouragement. Some needed a good kick in the pants.

It just so happens that the church in Corinth needed all three. Paul wrote far more to the church in Corinth than any other church. Our NT contains two letters that total 29 chapters. Romans is the second closest with 16 chapters. Internal evidence within Paul’s two letters reveal that Paul wrote an additional two letters to the Corinthian church that has been lost to time. Those two others letters didn’t make it into the canon of Scripture.

Paul had been used of God to found the church. The story of its founding is recorded in Acts 18. When Paul arrived in Corinth he was befriended by a fellow Jew named Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They had recently arrived from Rome. The two were believers. All three were tent-makers. That was their trade. They all lived and worked together both in making tents and in building a church in Corinth. Paul spent 18 months in Corinth before moving on to another field of service.

You have heard the term problem-child. The Church at Corinth was Paul’s problem child. The city of Corinth was a terribly immoral place. It was the Las Vegas of its day. Some of that immorality and much of its worldliness made its way into the Church at Corinth.

I recently came across a book entitled, *Twelve Challenges Churches Face,* by Mark Dever who pastors a church in our nation’s capital. His book is drawn right straight from the pages of 1 Corinthians. He explores 12 different problems the Church in Corinth faced and that any church can face.

Over the next 12 weeks, with the exception of the Sundays I will be gone, we are going to work our way systematically through this letter and tackle those problems. I am going to preach my own messages, but I will use Dever’s book somewhat as a template or an outline of the 12 issues.

When I was in school, the big buzz word that was being used was the term church growth. Everyone was studying and writing and speaking about church growth. While I want our church to grow and I know you want our church to grow, I have come to believe there is something far more important that our church needs than simply growth. What we most need is church health. Healthy organisms automatically grow. If a child is not growing, that child is not healthy.

Many churches are failing to thrive because they are not healthy. Over the next several months we are going to be looking at different characteristics of church health. If we are healthy, we will overcome the 12 challenges that Dever deals with in his treatment of 1 Corinthians.

The first challenge Dever examines is forgetfulness. Look with me a 1 Corinthians 1:1-9. As we work our way through this text, we will find that healthy churches remember. I want to show you four things we need to remember.

1. **LET US REMEMBER WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE HAVE.**

When you and I write a letter, we put out name at the end of the letter. We write *sincerely,* and then we sign our name after we have said everything we wanted to say. In Paul’s day, every letter started with a greeting that included the author’s name. That makes more sense, especially if you ended up writing or receiving a long letter. From the very start the recipient would know who had written the letter.

According to Paul, he wrote this letter with the help of a man named Sosthenes. Have you ever heard of Sosthenes? Do you know anything about him? Well, the people in the Church at Corinth knew about Sosthenes because he had been one of them. Let’s go back to Acts 18. Let’s begin in v. 8 and read through v. 17.

Apparently, there were two different synagogue leaders who came to Christ one after the other. After trusting Christ, Sosthenes accompanied Paul for a time, and he was with Paul when the apostle wrote this letter to the church in Corinth where Sosthenes once lived.

Can you imagine having Paul as your pastor—the one who wrote 13 letters that we have in our NT, one of the most famous missionaries in the history of the Church? What a beginning these believers enjoyed!

As Paul begins this letter, the first thing he does is to remind them who they are and what they have. He says to them in v. 2, you are the church; you are those who have been sanctified (set apart) by Jesus; you are saints.

Over time, we have a tendency to forget who we are in Christ. We need to be reminded. Healthy churches are filled with people who know who they are. We are not a civic club like the Rotary or the Lions; we are the Church of Jesus Christ. The Greek word for church means “the called out ones.” We have been called out of the world and to Christ.

We have been set apart by Jesus. As an illustration of what it means to be sanctified, I once heard someone say that the most sanctified thing in your house is your toothbrush. It is set apart to one person—you. It is set apart to one purpose. You may use an old toothbrush to scrub the toilet, but you don’t use your present toothbrush to do anything but brush your teeth.

Likewise, we have been set apart to one person and for one purpose. We are sanctified by Jesus and for Jesus. That means you are special. Don’t forget that.

And you are a saint. The Catholic Church says that to become a saint you have to have performed two miracles in your lifetime; you also have to be dead, and you have to be confirmed as a saint by the church leadership.

The Bible disagrees. It teaches that every believer is a saint. You may not always act saintly, but if you are a follower of Jesus you, my friend, are a saint.

Verse 3 reminds us of some things we have—grace and peace. The first makes the second possible. Verse 4 continues that idea of us being recipients of God’s grace. Grace is always freely given. It is never deserved. It is never a reward. It is always a gift.

Verse 5 tells us that this grace has enriched us in every possible way but namely in what we say and what we know.

Look at v. 7. We are not lacking.

Verse 8—Jesus is going to sustain us to the end as guiltless. What a gift! Your ultimate salvation is not up to you because you are not up to it. It is up to Him, and He alone is up to it.

Verse 9—You and I have been called into fellowship with Jesus. Jesus isn’t someone we just read about or hear sermons about. We actually get to spend time with Him. What an incredible thing!

Two weeks ago tomorrow, I spent the better part of the day at Integris Bass Hospital standing in for Perry Walker, the chaplain. I visited all the new admits and several others. On one particular visit I introduced myself to the patient and her husband who was in the room. During the visit the husband said that he was a believer in Jesus, but he didn’t care much for the church. He defended his position by saying that Jesus left the 99 and went after the one lost sheep. He said that all he needed was Jesus.

I said that I understood what he was saying, but I pointed out that the 99 sheep is the church, and that Jesus went after the one to find him and return him to the fold.

The Church may disappoint you. The church will fail to live up to its calling, no doubt, but as I read the NT it occurs to me that Jesus is crazy about the church. Jesus loves the church so much that He died for her.

People like to say, “Jesus died for me.” They make the Christian faith into a private love affair. The Bible doesn’t teach that Jesus died for you; Jesus died for the Church. You are not the bride of Christ; the Bride of Jesus is the Church.

Paul reminds us who we are and what we have as the Church.

1. **LET US REMEMBER THE SOURCE OF ALL OUR BLESSINGS.**

Paul was very clear about the origin of all these wonderful things we have become and the great things we have been given. God is the author of our blessings. Just as it was God who called Paul to be an apostle, it is God who has called you to be His.

In v. 3, Paul wishes grace and peace upon the Corinthians believers, and he identified the dual source as being God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, in v. 4, Paul rightly thanked God for the grace we have received. All these gifts that are ours come from the same source—God.

We are not self-blessed people; we are God-blessed, and the God who blesses us is faithful (v. 9).

Richard Halverson began pastoring a Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. when he was in his early 40’s and stayed until his retirement. When he reached the age of 65 he didn’t really retire, he became the Chaplain of the US Senate for another and remained at that post for more than a dozen years. During his longer years of service, he pronounced the same benediction upon his congregation at the end of each service. He would look out at his people and say:

Wherever you go, God is sending you.  
Wherever you are, God has put you there.  
God has a purpose in your being right where you are.  
Christ, who indwells you by the power of his Spirit,  
wants to do something in and through you.  
Believe this and go in his grace, his love, his power.  
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen

We need to learn to see God in and behind and over all that we do. We need to remember that He hasn’t forgotten us.

1. **LET US REMEMBER IT IS ALL ABOUT JESUS.**

In the first nine verses of 1 Corinthians, the name *Jesus* is found eight times. The only two verses where the name of Jesus is not found are vv. 5 & 6, but those verses refer to *Him* and *Christ.* That means that every verse in our passage speaks about Jesus.

The Christian life is all about Jesus. Let’s do a quick run through of each verse:

* Paul was called to be an apostle of Jesus (v. 1).
* We have been sanctified in Jesus, and we called upon His name (v. 2).
* Grace and peace came to us from both Jesus and his Father (v.3).
* Grace was given us in Jesus (v. 4).
* We are enriched in Jesus in every way (v. 5).
* Our lives are to back up the truth about Jesus (v. 6).
* One day Jesus will be revealed from heaven (v. 7).
* Jesus will sustain us until He returns (v. 8).
* We are called into fellowship with Jesus (v. 9).

Surprisingly, some preachers can preach an entire sermon without ever mentioning Jesus. Paul could hardly write a single verse without naming Jesus.

The passage begins with Paul’s individual call, and it ends with our corporate call. Paul was called to be an apostle of Jesus, and we have been called into the fellowship of Jesus.

For many years I went with the youth of the churches I pastored to Falls Creek for a week at church camp during the summer. Every church every year had a t-shirt made for their week of camp. My all-time favorite Christian t-shirt was made for the youth of a church I never served—First Baptist El Reno. Their shirt was simple but powerful.

In the center of the t-shirt was the name Jesus, and next to the name of Jesus was a period. The message of the shirt was: “Jesus Period.”

The message of the church is not: “Jesus plus something.” Salvation is not Jesus plus works. The equation for happiness is not Jesus plus stuff. The secret of church growth is not Jesus plus clever marketing.

It is all and ever and only Jesus.

The song “Just Give Me Jesus” was an old Negro spiritual written during the days of slavery in America. The song was re-worked, and the first time I heard it, it was sung by Fernando Ortega. I like it. Here are the lyrics:

In the morning, when I rise

In the morning, when I rise

In the morning, when I rise, give me Jesus

Give me Jesus

Give me Jesus

You can have all this world

But give me Jesus

And when I am alone

Oh, and when I am alone

And when I am alone, give me Jesus

Give me Jesus

Give me Jesus

You can have all this world

But give me Jesus

And when I come to die

Oh, and when I come to die

And when I come to die, give me Jesus

Give me Jesus

Give me Jesus

You can have all this world

You can have all this world

You can have all this world

But give me Jesus

1. **LET US REMEMBER TO ENCOURAGE THE STRUGGLING.**

There is one more point I want to make. What I find fascinating is not only what Paul says but what he doesn’t say. We have to keep in mind that the Church in Corinth had been exasperating to Paul. Paul likely got more than a few gray hairs over this church.

Dever explained, “No other church in the New Testament has more problems nor such a variety . . . Leadership was misunderstood, people were self-deceived, the church was ridden with partisanship, pride, pretentiousness, and immorality.” He continued, “False teachers, super-spirituality, asceticism, and loveless selfishness were rife . . .”

Despite all the problems the church had and the headache they must have been to Paul, he still writes to them, “I give thanks to my God always for you . . .” (v. 4).

I particularly like two things that Dever wrote nearing the end of his first chapter. First, he claimed, “[Paul] understood that all of their particular sins and struggles were simply rearguard actions of the evil one in retreat.” Paul didn’t let the struggles of that Corinthians keep him from loving and praying for and encouraging them.

Likewise, you and I encounter folks who exasperate us. We watch what they do, and we will shake our heads. We hear what they say, and we will throw up our hands. Don’t be surprised to discover that the one who disappoints you most is the one you see when you look into the mirror.

Don’t give up on yourself, and don’t give up on the ones God has put in your circles of influence.

My daughter has a phrase I like. If she has a particularly difficult day, if things aren’t going well and working out as she thought they would, she will say that she was riding the struggle bus.

If you or those you love or those you are supposed to love are riding the struggle bus, don’t give up on them. Keep encouraging them in the Lord.

Here is the second and final thing Dever wrote that I want to pass on to you. When I read this statement, I underlined it and put a star beside it. He wrote, “Forgetfulness of God’s grace is one of the greatest tools in the enemy’s war against our souls.”

If we want to be a healthy church, we must remember, and one of the best things we can do for one another is to help them remember what God has done for us in Jesus.