

A Set Apart Church

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Introduction

Set Apart: Sanctification: “A five syllable abstraction” for being “set apart” or being made holy (living room or dining room in grandma’s house; fine china).

- So the Bible speaks of holy ground, holy assemblies, a holy nation, a holy city, holy promises, a holy kiss (don’t get any ideas). These are all things that are set apart from their “common” use for a special God use. Because “our holiness is rooted in the very “god”-ness of God. God is the most set apart, there is an infinite qualitative difference between the Creator and the creature. God is one of a kind” (Piper).
- As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:15-16).
 - \$450 bottle of whiskey he waited in line 48 hours to buy, tried to start a lawnmower with it.

Details: In 16 chapters, 437 verses, 6829 words, Paul writes one of the most interesting and action packed letters — First Corinthians (or if you’re British, “One” Corinthians). We’re going to cover this letter in 27 sermons between now and Easter (with four week break during Advent).

- A number of things make 1 Corinthians interesting. It is a response to a letter he received from Corinth: Now concerning the matters about which you wrote (1 Cor 7:1).
 - It’s like we’re reading someone’s mail. We jump into the middle of an ongoing conversation. Paul wrote at least three letters and possibly four (depending on whether or not you consider the tearful letter a separate letter).¹
- Paul had significant history with the church in Corinth, having founded it (cf. Acts 18) and served there for more than a year and a half (longer than most places).

Tonight we’ll look at his opening remarks before we get into the body of the letter in future weeks.

¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1. An Apostle’s Letter (v. 1) ¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

¹ Cf. 1 Cor 5:9, 1 Cor, 2 Cor 2:3-4, 2 Cor

Paul's Story: Paul Paul is famous for having written 13 of the 27 books of the NT (almost 50% of the books and 25-30% of the words). He was Jewish by ethnicity (Saul) but also a Roman citizen (Paul).

- He was not just apathetic to Christ but *anti-Christian*. He was, according to his own words, “a blasphemer” and “persecutor” of Christians (1 Tim 1:13).
- Paul is a living example that God radically changes lives. Right at the heart of what we believe is that the **gospel changes lives**. It turns persecutors into pastors, it turns enemies into friends. We don't ever want to get far away from a **simple faith** that God radically changes lives.

God's Call: How did Paul change from an *antagonist* to an *apostle*? He was called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.

- It is the call of God that made him an apostle. It's the call of God that makes us a church. It's the call of God that makes us holy.²
- Paul is an apostle, not because of his ability or his search for God, but because of God's choice of him. He is not self-promoting but pointing to Christ (true apostleship points to Christ).
 - He didn't turn in his résumé to become an apostle. He didn't interview and get the job. God saved him, slammed him, struck him blind, and then sent him to the Gentiles. This wasn't his lifelong dream.
 - He didn't encounter an idea, or a theology, or philosophy on the Road to Damascus, he encountered the risen and living Lord Jesus Christ and was permanently changed.
 - His authority is from God and not himself.
- This should be true of all of us: we should be defined by our relationship to God (not our job, where we live, what we drive, etc.).
- It is the will of God that **calls** us and **keeps** us. Paul doesn't fall apart under challenges to his authority. He doesn't crumble under insecurity because his **identity** is securely rooted in the perfect and permanent call of God.
 - Having your identity rooted in Christ will inoculate you from undue criticism or pursuing conformity to the world.

Co-writer: And our brother Sosthenes. I don't want to dwell on this, but I don't want to overlook it. We don't exactly know who Sosthenes is. There is a Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18 from Corinth (but it also is a common name).

- I do want to point out that 8 of Paul's 13 letters are co-authored (Silvanus, Timothy, etc.). He is not a power-hungry, authority-seeking, my-way-or-the-highway CEO apostle. He works in a matrix of relationships, a plurality of leaders, and from a position of partnership and humility.

² κλητὸς ἀπόστολος (1:1), τῆ ἐκκλησία (1:2), κλητοῖς ἀγίοις (1:2), τοῖς ἐπικαλουμένοις τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (1:2), ἐκλήθητε εἰς κοινωνίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ (1:9).

2. A Church's Calling (vv. 2-3) ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

God's Church: To the church of God... with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

- Paul is writing to the church of God at Corinth. **They belong to God!** *The location is Corinth* but the church is God's (be wary when people start identifying church's by people, e.g., John Piper's church).
- What brings us together is not a pastoral personality or personal preference but our common submission to the Lordship of Christ.³

Corinth: in Corinth Let's talk about Corinth. A major city of antiquity founded by Alexander the Great. Located 50 miles from Athens, it's on this little isthmus that connects the mainland of Greece with the Peloponnese peninsula (home to Olympia and Sparta).

- This little stretch of land was only 4 miles wide (small ships dragged across; large ships unloaded). It became the trade route between East (Asia) and West (Rome).

Destroyed by the Romans during their war with Greece, it was rebuilt only about 100 years before Paul landed there.

- It's a trade city (dripping with money), full of commerce, tourists, and entrepreneurs. It was populated by freemen (not aristocrats; i.e., upward mobility). So all of this new money was spent on personal luxury.
 - Like the **Wild West** of the Ancient Mediterranean.
- It was a cosmopolitan hodgepodge of people. Sailors transporting wares, entrepreneurs trying to make a buck, tourists passing through, athletes participating in or training for the biannual Isthmian games (booths left over from 49 and in full swing in 51).
 - Temples and their priests and prostitutes for every conceivable god. They were pluralistic (not atheistic). If one god is good, more gods are better.
- Corinth was historically promiscuous and unprincipled with a licentious and unsavory reputation (i.e., port), when someone said "Corinth" people thought of "**culture and courtesans**" (cf. **Las Vegas without family friendly shows**). They were obsessed with the latest worldly philosophies and pleasures.
 - Because they were so prosperous, overflowing with people and money, they didn't much care what some backwater evangelist had to say about right and wrong.
- They were **intellectually alert, materially prosperous, but morally corrupt**.
 - They worshipped money, physical strength, and personal accomplishments. They were committed to the "**reckless development of the individual**" and pursued "**success by every and all means**." They "**surrendered to every lust**" because there was "**no superior law but one's own desires**" (sound familiar).
 - **Philadelphia: obsessed with sports, do whatever I want to do, preoccupied with the latest fashion, no behavior is off limits. A culture**

³ "No Christian or group of Christians possesses a monopoly of the presence, wisdom or power of Christ" (Thiselton)

where self-achievement, self-promotion, self-sufficiency, self-congratulation, and autonomy trump basic love and respect of others.⁴

Paul at Corinth: The story of Paul's coming to Corinth is told in **Acts 18**. Paul was coming to Corinth having been persecuted and driven out of his previous missionary locations. He's coming as a tentmaker to this populated and wealthy city.

- He goes to the synagogue first, only to be kicked out. He sets up in someone's house next door to the synagogue ("bold move Cotton").
- In a city dripping with money and dedicated to superstitious polytheism, Paul's message of Jesus as the "one true and living God" and Jesus as the rightful ruler of all people was offensive. "The gospel of a humiliated, crucified Christ was *an affront* to people who cherished *success* and who loved *winners*" (Thiselton). Corinth is the definition of hard soil.
- But then God does a miracle: ⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (Acts 18:8-10).
 - This week, as I prayed through this passage, I believe this is true of Philadelphia: "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people."

Sanctified: To those sanctified (ἁγιασμένοις) in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (ἁγίοις).

- "Sanctified" and "saints" are just words for "holy" (holy-fied, holy ones). Don't think Roman Catholic view of saints.
 - "Saint is one of the most widely misunderstood words in our Christian vocabulary. At some point in church history, people began to call the original apostles saints, contrary to the plain meaning of the word as used in the New Testament. So now we hear of Saint Paul, Saint Peter, Saint Andrew, and the like. In the Roman Catholic tradition, people of unusual achievement are sometimes designated as saints. Among evangelicals we often think of saints as exceptionally godly and holy people. **The truth is, though, every believer is a saint.** In fact, sainthood is not a spiritual attainment, or even a recognition of such attainment. It is rather a state or status into which God brings every believer. **All Christians are saints.** (Bridges).
- If you are in Christ you are set apart by God and for God. You are made special by the work of Christ.

Identity: This is a beautiful truth we often overlook. God has called you, he has chosen you, he has set you apart.

⁴ Rhetoric over reality. Apollos came after Paul (a smart Alexandrian, via Ephesus). Cf. Acts 18:26-28 (articulate, convincing message). Paul demonstrated a studied simplicity and Apollos showed rhetorical prowess.

- **Who are you?** Father? Mother? Employee? Student? When you introduce yourself, we normally talk about where we're from or what we do. But our primary identity is who we are.
 - **HC:** What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.
 - ¹² But to all who did receive him (i.e., Jesus), who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (Jn 1:12-13).
 - God chose you. God loved you. God has adopted you. God loves you so much that he died for you. Your identity and worth is deeply connected to who you are in Christ. You are made in the image of God and he is making you like Christ.
 - It's going to be hard for you to live holy if you don't view yourself with the same value that Christ views you (e.g., dinner or saint; dirty vs. clean car).

Holiness in Three Tenses: Many theologians discuss sanctification in three simultaneous tenses (past, present, and future). I have been sanctified (**past**), am being sanctified (**present**), and will be sanctified (**future**).

- In Christ, I am made holy. He has *saved* me.
- In eternity, I will be forever made holy. I will be glorified for all eternity.
- But we live in the **messy middle**. We are not just saved from sin but saved for a new life in Christ. In many ways, discipleship is the process of becoming what we already are in Christ. Be what God has already made you. Possess the land he has already give you. Walk in the holiness he has already purchased for you. Fan into flame the gifts he has already given you.

The Problem in Corinth: That's the problem in Corinth, Paul knows what they experienced in Christ and where their destiny is in Christ, but he's received word that how they're living in the present is not a reflection of their holy status.

- The vision Paul had for the Christian community in Corinth has failed to come to fruition. They are looking and acting just like the world. Harvey Wilcox and his wife Daeida (born in Hicksville, OH) were devout Christians. Harvey earned a small fortune in real estate and moved in 1883 with his wife out West. Finding more real estate success, he and his wife decided to develop a suburban oasis built on their moral vision, "where alcohol, gambling, and prostitution were forbidden and religion was the foundation of the community." This subdivision was known as Hollywood. This feels like the church, called to be separate but too often leading the worldly charge.

- They are called to be saints but they aren't living that way. In Christ, you and I are set apart and holy, **start living like it.**
- "The church was in the world, as it had to be, but the world was in the Church, as it ought not to be." The church must be in the world and should be for the good of the world, but we can't do that if we act just like the world. If we have the same values and allegiances of the world, then we have nothing to offer them.
 - Like God is holy, we are supposed to be a holy nation in the middle of a fallen world.
 - The word for church even comes from the root meaning "called out" ones. The church is called together *out* of the world.
- Is the church living sanctified? Are we just like the world? Do we have the same greed, lust, power-hungry, self-absorbed, vengeful values? Or do we do things different? Are our relationships different? Sexual values? Marriages? Generosity? Forgiveness? Humility?
 - God is not calling us to be an isolated subculture, a bunker avoiding the problems of the world but an influential outpost serving and helping, a light in the midst of the darkness.⁵

3. A Faithful God (vv. 4-9) ⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Real Thanks: I give thanks to my God always for you. Paul makes a profound choice, at this point, to be thankful. *He's thankful for them.* This church that is all jacked up:

- 3 (living according to the flesh), 5 (someone is sleeping with their stepmom), 6 (dragging each other to court), 8-9 (dividing over food), 11 (mocking the Lord's Supper), 12-14 (using God's gifts for self exaltation rather than God's glory).
- But Paul is is not tapping out, in fact he's doubling down (Lorritts). I'd encourage you, with all of the division in our culture (political, pandemic, cultural, personal), don't run for the exit.
- The church is God's plan A.
 - The *church* is who Christ "loved and gave himself up for" (Eph 5:25); the *church* is what Christ promised to build (Matt 16:18); it is through the *church* that the "wisdom of God" is made known (Eph 3:10).
 - And the church is described in the NT as primarily local, an embodied fellowship of imperfect saints. It is not an ideal to be achieved but a family to be loved.
- Everyone it seems wants to be "spiritual but not religious" which is like saying you're "married but not coming home." It's impossible! You may have swapped the church for the stadium or the gym or the bar, but you are worshipping something, somewhere, with

⁵ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

someone. “Spiritual but not religious” just seems to mean you believe in ghosts but not God, you’re cool with astrology but not theology.

- I heard someone say, being in church doesn’t make you a Christian anymore than being in a garage makes you a car. *And it’s right*. But it seems to imply that you don’t need to be part of the church, you don’t need to gather with the saints, you can just do your own thing.
- I would use a different metaphor. I’d say, being in a freezer doesn’t make you an ice cube but *if you’re an ice cube you better get in that freezer or you’re gonna melt*.
 - God has called this beautiful and broken body together, to be on mission for God. He’s called us to stand out in this crooked world.

Greater Hope: Why can I double down on the people of God, the church? because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.

- **Even when he can’t thank the Corinthians for their *present* behavior he can thank God for his persevering grace.**
- In fact, the missteps of the Corinthian church only highlight the beauty of God’s undeserved grace to his people.
- Paul’s confidence is in God’s grace, not their ability.
 - In fact, their weakness is an opportunity for God to show off his strength.
 - We often get too focused on the gift, rather than the giver. We want to elevate people to positions of celebrity and status when *only God belongs in such an exalted position*.
 - We need less Christian celebrities and more unknown servants (e.g., Marco, Herb Hathaway, Jim Barr, etc.).

Remember the Change: But Paul has another tool in his arsenal, when he is tempted to doubt the presence of God, he looks back at his faithfulness in the past. That in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you.

- Paul remembers how the church in Corinth was born. Paul remembers the obstacles they overcame. Paul remembers the lives that were changed.
- We should *remember to remember*. We need to develop the habit of remembering the miracles of God to combat discouragement we might face in the moment (e.g., salvations, provisions, healings, etc.)
 - The same God that saved them is the same God that is going to finish what he started.
- He knows how they were rich in God (not in the things of this world).

Not Lacking: So that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, whatever they need to accomplish the plan of God, he has provided. They might lack what they *think* they need, but they do not lack anything they actually need (e.g., rich in God).

- “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for **apart from me you can do nothing**” (Jn 15:5).
- What would it look like if we actually lived like we have what we need in Christ?! We don't need a building or big budget but bold trust in God.

He Will Hold Me Fast: ⁸ Who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. We can have confidence because God never fails. He always finishes what he starts (Phil 1:6).

- We will stand guiltless before the Lord not in our strength but his. The gospel: **he is stronger than your weakness, your doubts, your shortcomings, and your sin.**
- “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thes 5:24).

Conclusion:

- God calls us to be set apart and that's only gonna happen when we double down on his strength, rather than our own. We need to live by his calling and his methods, rather than our own.
 - Let's double down on his message, his grace, his church, his holiness, in the midst of a world that tells you differently. And in the process we'll present a truly counter cultural alternative to the idols of our world.