



**The Church Selfie
I Corinthians 9:1-9**

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Last Thursday evening, Valerie and I went to a play in Tucson. As we waited for the play to start, I all of a sudden realized what the date was. I turned to Valerie and said, "Today is the 26th. It was exactly 5 months since Larry DeLong's death, our senior pastor. We talked about that for a while as we looked back.

We are coming up on our annual meeting, a time for us as a church to look back on this past year, 2016. It is hard to look back. We went through some really tough times, but great things happened, too. It's all in the Annual Report, a snapshot of last year, a church selfie, so to speak.

In our scripture passage today, the Apostle Paul writes to his church in the city of Corinth. It is a church that is struggling big time. Much of the letter to the Corinthians deals with the issues that the church is going through.

Before correcting the mistakes, in the beginning of his letter to this church, Paul makes it clear that despite all that was broken in the church, he was still deeply satisfied with what God was accomplishing in the church.

"I give thanks to my God always for you," Paul writes. It's as if he's making a point to say, "Despite the immorality, despite the gossip, despite the immaturity and selfishness on display in this church, I want it to be clear that I am still overjoyed at the miracle that is this church."

So let's read what the Apostle Paul is so thankful for because we can apply it to our church as well. Turn with me to our scripture passage in your bulletin. Before we read, let us pray.

Prayer: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

Read I Corinthians 1:1-9

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

2 To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

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

4 I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

5 For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— **6** God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among 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 also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. **9** God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

As I mentioned, this coming Friday is our annual meeting when the church looks back at the previous year. Now, annual meetings can be pretty boring. But we are making this one different. Besides eating together, we are giving you an opportunity to look at our church and give your dreams. We are going to ask you 3 questions; they are listed under our scripture passage:

What are we doing really well?

What needs to be strengthened?

What are your dreams for this church? Let's give this one a time period of 5 years. What will our church look like in 5 years?

For those of you who are visitors, if you belong to a church, I encourage you to answer these questions for your own church. If you do not have a church, I hope by the end of this message, you will see in spite of the problems that can happen in a church, it still is a wonderful place to be. Thus, I encourage you to find a church home.

Paul gives three reasons why he is so thankful for and satisfied with the Corinthian church body, despite its issues. They are reasons that apply to us as well....and every other church. For Paul, the Corinthian church was still something to marvel over because it had grace.

What makes a body of believers great is not the great things done by them, but the great mercy shown to them. The primary reason Paul was overjoyed with the church at Corinth is because grace has washed over them. "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus ..."

The church has been extended so much grace that it is called holy. "You are called to be holy," Paul says. Holiness is not something we strive for, rather, it is God's favor extended to us. Not only that, to be holy means that we are set apart for a special, divine purpose. That divine purpose is the same one given to the Israelites when God first called them: you are going to be my people, and you will be set apart to be a light for Me to the other nations.

The purpose of today's church is the same. I like the way one man put it: "The church is not so much a collection of individuals pursuing God together, rather, the body of people through whom God pursues the world." (The Pursuing God by

God uses us to pursue the world for God.

I love the words to the choir's anthem today, especially these:

Let our beacon of light blaze a pathway
in spite of the times we let You down.

Take our flaws and mistakes, something new You'll create.

A reminder of our call: to show Your ocean of love,
Crashing waves from above to all people who thirst for more.

This is our divine purpose: as God extends grace to us, we are to extend it to others.

When I was on my sabbatical last summer and the church was going through a hard time, I prayed a lot for this church. I did a Moses thing: when God wanted to give up on the Israelites because they were messing up and God wanted to take His presence away from them, Moses had a discussion with God, kind of a bargaining session with God. Moses gave all the reasons why God shouldn't take His presence away from the Israelites. Moses was pleading the case of the Israelites: Don't leave us.

I pleaded your case last summer with God. As I prayed, I gave reasons to God why we still needed to exist: "God, I know that your kingdom will still keep going if our church disappears. But you have placed us on this hill, at the southern end of Green Valley to be a light. We have a building that is not only beautiful, but inviting. People are always visiting. And your presence is in this place, especially when we worship. We can still be a light for You. So in your grace and forgiveness, I ask that you will save us, help us, resurrect us, and may this place be a special place for your presence."

I believe God is answering this prayer. The thing is no matter how much we mess up as a church, we are offered grace again and again. "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus," Paul says.

Paul gives a second reason why he is thankful for the Corinthian church. Not only did the church in Corinth have grace but it had gifts, spiritual ones. You are enriched, Paul says, and you do not lack in any spiritual gift. You are a very gifted church by God.

Sure, every church is a ragtag bunch of broken believers. But God promised that when the church is established by God's grace it's also gifted and equipped to be the church by the power of the Spirit. Yes, the church in Corinth had its troubles. But it wasn't without hope because it, and every other church including ours, is promised a reservoir of gifts and talents that simply need to be unleashed and encouraged.

What are the gifts that God has clearly given to this congregation? What are the ministries God has started and the needs God is meeting through this body of believers? What gifts and talents do we simply need to unleash and encourage? Think on these things as you answer the question “What are things we do really well? And if we do unleash these gifts and talents, what will our church look like in 5 years?

Paul marvels at his church because they have been given grace. So have we.
Paul marvels at his church because they have been given gifts. So have we.
And, Paul marvels at his church because they have been given a guarantee.

God “ will sustain you until the end,” says Paul.

Undergirding the life of each and every local church is the truth that, despite all of our imperfections, the end is not in doubt. The future of God's kingdom is not dependent on whether or not we get our act together. Thanks be to God!

Individual churches will come and go, but the future is secure because Christ has promised that in the end, no matter what, he will return, he will resurrect, he will find us faultless, he will establish his kingdom, and until that day, God will keep his church alive. Guaranteed.

Think on all of this as you answer those 3 questions in your bulletin:
Think of the grace given to us –oh, we have experienced it, haven't we?
Think of gifts given to enrich and equip us – you are so gifted, my friends.
And think on the guarantee that no matter what, God's kingdom will prevail.

The Apostle Paul uses beautiful words in this passage to describe the church. They are our words, too: sanctified, holy, gifted, enriched, blameless, firm to the end, fellowship with each other and Jesus. For all her struggles, she, the church, has a lot going for her. Let's never forget that. She -- we -- are still something to be satisfied with, something to behold. Not because of what we bring to the table, but because of what God has done to us and through us in Christ.

In the words of our choir:

Let our passion for You shine in all that we do,
So the hope that You bring can't be ignored.
Lives will be restored. This is the place for healing grace.
Lord, may we show Your healing grace. Amen.