

Back to the Basics - *1 Corinthians 1:1-9*

Series Introduction:

- We're beginning a new series going through 1 Corinthians, just like we mentioned last week. I've been really excited for this series, to go through this book together. And if you look at the screen, you'll see we're calling this series "Gospel Lens". And I want you to keep that in mind, because it's such an appropriate title for this series, and we're going to come back to why that is a little bit later.
- But right off the bat, I love this book. It's not necessarily an easy one to read, there's lots of tougher passages to work through, but it is so applicable for us here in Toronto, and as we get started, I want to just give you a bit of the background, and context for why Paul is writing this letter, and who he's writing to, because that's really important for understanding the book.
- During Paul's missionary journeys, that are recorded for us in the book of Acts, we are told in Acts 18 about his visit to the city of Corinth, and the church that he started there.
- And the city of Corinth itself was not a good place. It was sort of a cultural and commercial hub in the Mediterranean world, but it was also a city that was infamous for incredible immorality. This was true to the point where calling someone "Corinthian" became an incredible insult, as it was essentially calling them an incredibly immoral person.
- This is the kind of city that most church planters would want to steer clear of, but this is where Paul ended up, and he established a church there, living with them for about a year and a half helping the church to get established, then he moved on and continued his journey.
- But some time after Paul had left the church, he started to receive reports that things were just not going well at all, and there were many different issues that had begun to arise in the church.
- This letter is Paul's response to some of those issues. And really, the purpose of this letter is for Paul to try to re-orient the church, address these issues, and help them to understand how the Gospel impacts every area of their lives.
- And that's one of the reasons that I think this title of "Gospel Lens" is so appropriate for this series. I wear these glasses, and I would say that my vision isn't too bad, but if I were to take them off and look out at all of you, all I can really see is a bunch of human shaped blurs. I couldn't tell you who was who if I hadn't already seen you all earlier.

- And in a way, that's what had begun to happen to the church in Corinth after Paul left. All of the cultural pressure and influence around them had begun to blur their vision, so they couldn't really see clearly, resulting in a lot of the issues that Paul is addressing in this letter.
- What Paul is really doing here, it's as if he's handing the church a pair of glasses, saying "put these on, and let's look at these issues through the lens of the Gospel, to see how the truth about Jesus Christ is going to clarify and change the way you view each of these areas in your life".
- So that's kind of the set up for this series, and I'm hoping that as we work through this book together, we'll be able to see how Paul's words in 1 Corinthians are really so important for us here at Liberty Grace, and in Toronto, living in a culture that I would say, in a lot of ways, is not all that far off from the culture that you'd find in Corinth.
- So as we start out our series today, we're just looking at the first 9 verses, which are Paul's opening words of this letter.
- This first few verses of the book, Paul's introduction, are really split into two different parts, in which Paul is giving the church two important reminders that are going to set the stage for what the rest of the book talks about, and teach us what we need in order to remain faithful in a hostile and immoral culture.
- Essentially he looks at this church and thinks to himself "we need to start back at square 1 here", so he begins by bringing them back to the basics of the Gospel with these first two reminders.

Paul reminds us of who we are in Christ (V. 1-3)

- And the first reminder that Paul gives to the church is found in V. 1-3. Verse 1 starts out with these words:

"Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes," - 1 Cor. 1:1 (ESV)

- This was pretty normal for Paul's letters, and if you look through them, you notice that most of them open with him introducing himself in this way, and he is specific to remind them that he is "*Called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus*", or specially called by God to be a messenger for Christ.
- And he starts this way to re-establish his credentials, and his authority, so that the church knows to take him seriously in what he's about to tell them.
- But he actually cuts his introduction a bit short in this book compared to a lot of his other letters. Rather to take more time to elaborate on what Christ has done in his own life, and

introduce himself more fully, he quickly reminds them of his calling as an apostle, then moves on to focus on something different, and a bit more pressing in his mind.

- Look at what V. 2 says:

“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:” - 1 Cor. 1:2 (ESV)

- In this verse, Paul isn't introducing himself to the church anymore, it's almost as if he's introducing the church to themselves. His goal isn't to tell them about who he is, he's reminding them of who they are. The church of God in Corinth, those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together.
- In this, he really focuses on the idea of the community that they have been called into.
- This church existed in a brutally difficult context, where they would be bombarded every day by the immorality of the culture around them, and they would have faced constant pressure to compromise and give into living the way that the world around them was telling them that they should, and to live faithfully to the Gospel would make them stick out like a sore thumb in the eyes of the culture in a pretty uncomfortable way. And we know that they had begun to give in to some of this pressure, because that's the main reason that Paul was writing to them.
- And so he begins here, reminding them of who they are. They are the church of God. They are those who are sanctified in Christ, and called to be saints. They have been called to be set apart, and to be different from the world and the culture around them. That's what he means when he says that they have been sanctified in Christ and called to be Saints. They have been called to be set apart from the world around them, and belong to Christ.
- But he takes it a step farther than that when he says that they are *“called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”*.
- They're not just this random isolated group of people down in Corinth, all alone and different from everyone else around them, like it probably felt some days.
- In this verse, Paul yanks the church out of their immediate context, the city of Corinth, which was proving so challenging, and he places them in the context of the larger church as a whole. They're not alone, but are a part of this larger group of believers, unified by Christ with people all over the world.
- And this is such an important reminder. William Barclay writes:
 - *“The Christians called into a community whose boundaries include all earth and all heaven. It would be greatly to our good if sometimes we lifted our eyes beyond our own little circle and thought of ourselves as part of the Church of God which is as wide as the world”*. - William Barclay

- Our culture can be discouraging and overwhelming can't it? It can be difficult to feel like we are constantly facing all of this pressure from the world around us, to live their way rather than God's way. Whether that's from friends, family, co-workers, whoever.
- But Paul is giving such a great reminder here that we are not alone in this.
- This is one of the reasons that it is so important to get connected into a local church, and connect deeply. This is a team sport that wasn't meant for any one of us to take on alone. In the midst of a discouraging culture, it's so encouraging to remember we're not alone in this.
- Even as a church, it can be lonely and discouraging here in Toronto, but we are not just an isolated group here as Liberty Grace, we are a part of a much greater community, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord.
- This is also setting up the first issue that Paul wants to tackle, which we'll see over the next two weeks as we look at the first four chapters of this book, which is divisions in the church.
- Reminding them that they are united by Christ as a part of the church together so "don't start turning guns on one another".
- And he hammers home this idea at the end of V. 2, when he refers to Jesus Christ as "*both their Lord and ours*". For those who have trusted in Christ, no matter who you are, we have one thing in common. We are united in Christ.
- And he returns to this idea in V. 9, when he says:

"God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."
- 1 Cor. 1:9 (ESV)

- As the church we have been called by God into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ, and into a larger community together with all those who call on the name of Christ.
- And the fact that we have been called into this great fellowship also implies that we have been called out of something else. Specifically, out of the culture that they have been living in, and the sinful lifestyle that Corinth was known for. Again, Paul is hammering home this theme here that the church is called to be distinct, something different from the world around them, and the same is true for you and I here.
- So who are we in Christ? We are those sanctified in Christ, called to be saints together with everyone who calls on his name.
- Then in V. 3 Paul writes these words:

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." - 1 Cor.1:3 (ESV)

- Again, a typical line of greeting that you find in Paul's letters.

- You can see how important these introductions are, and how much Paul is getting across to this struggling church in just these first few sentences.

Paul reminds us what Christ has done for us (V. 4-9)

- So now that Paul has reminded the church of who they are in Christ, he moves on to the second reminder in V. 4-9, which is to remind the church of what Christ has done for them. Why it is that they are so different from the world around them.
- And he begins in V. 4, saying:

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus,” - 1 Cor. 1:4 (ESV)

- He begins with this expression of thanksgiving for what God has done for the church.
- To feel so different from the culture and the people around us can feel really heavy some days, and we get tired. We kind of wish we could just fit in, but as Paul talks about what God has done for the church, it is entirely a gift that we have been given. He is thankful to God for the grace that he has shown through Christ Jesus.
- This should be our attitude towards the Gospel. It’s an amazing gift.
- He also makes it clear that this is a gift that comes through no work of our own. He is not thankful for the efforts of the Corinthian church, but for the grace that God has given.
- And then he continues in the remaining verses to elaborate more on exactly what that gift is, and what Christ has done in them.

“that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” - 1 Cor. 1:5-8 (ESV)

- The world offers us so many things, this idea of the “good life” that can look so tempting and enticing. They say that we’re missing out on so much because we live differently.
- But Paul’s encouragement and reminder for the church here is about this great gift that they have already been given in Christ, which is greater than anything the world could offer.
- Look at what he says: “You were enriched in all speech and knowledge”, “You are not lacking in any gift”, and Christ will “sustain us to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”.
- That’s it. He mentions the testimony about Christ, and what he’s referring to there is the testimony of the death and the resurrection of our Lord. That he died to take the punishment

for our sins, so that our relationship with God could be restored, and because of that gift, we have this fellowship with him. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- And again, some of the things that Paul mentions here, the gifts made available through the Spirit and the Gospel, that the church was enriched in all speech and knowledge, that they were not lacking any gifts, etc. were actually some of the sources for the issues that he is trying to address, and even here at the beginning he is reminding the people that what they have is such a great gift that God has given, so just as he does, they should be praising God, giving thanks for these gifts that have been made available to them in Christ.
- This section also focuses on a call to perseverance on the part of the church in the face of the opposing and almost suffocating culture that is surrounding them. Encouraging them that because of what Christ has done for them in the Gospel, he will sustain them to the end. Again, the focus is not on our own ability, but God's grace and faithfulness through Christ.
- And again, V. 9 reminds us that very same truth that we have been called into fellowship with Christ Jesus because of the faithfulness of God.
- Nothing that the world will offer us could ever be greater than the gift of the Gospel through Jesus Christ, so don't exchange the truth of the Gospel with the empty promises of the world.

Conclusion: This Basic Truth

- Now at the end, I want to take us back to something that I said in the beginning, that Paul's Goal in this passage is to take the church "back to the basics".
- When I say that, I don't mean at all that all of this is something that is mundane, or boring that we need to skip through to get to the really good stuff. It's anything but that.
- But what Paul says here is "basic" in that it is essential and foundational for the entire Christian life. It's the base that our entire life needs to be built on, who we are in Christ, and what he's done for us.
- This needs to be understood first, because if you miss this, the rest of the Christian life makes no sense. You can't see how the Gospel impacts and transforms your life, if you don't understand the Gospel itself.
- And that's why Paul had to start here. he even tells the church later at the beginning of Ch. 3,

"But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready," - 1 Cor. 3:1-2 (ESV)

- He knew and understood where the church was at, and knew that this essential foundation needed to be further developed for them before they would be ready to understand how this message impacted the rest of their lives.
- That brings us back around to the title of this series as a whole, which I think is so fitting for this book, “Gospel Lens”.
- If we are looking at this book as showing us how to view life through the “lens of the Gospel”, in these first verses, Paul is giving us the lens itself. Bringing us back to the basics, reminding us of the fundamentals of what the Gospel is and why it is so important.
- And again, that does not mean that once you’ve learned this, you can just move past it to focus on other things. This “Gospel Lens” that Paul is giving the church, is a lens that is just as important for someone who has been a Christian for fifty years as it is for the person who just became a Christian yesterday.
- It is the basic, fundamental, and foundational truth of Christianity, that our entire life needs to be built on, because when we remove this lens, and exchange it for another one, like the lens that our world and our culture offers to us, as the church in Corinth had done, then we will find ourselves running into all kinds of problems.
- In order to remain faithful to God in a hostile and immoral culture, our lives have to be built on the basic truths of who we are in Christ and what he has done for us.
- So let’s pray that that would be true of us. That as we go through this series, and explore Paul’s words in this book, that God would help us to understand more of how this amazing message of the Gospel, impacts and fully transforms every area of our lives, giving thanks to him for the grace that has been given to us in Christ Jesus.