



Central
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Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Remember Who You Are

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

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series: crazychurch

One of the most important things in life is not forgetting who you are. I heard a story about two elderly women who were discussing the problems of getting older. One said to the other, "The worst thing is when your memory starts to go. I've known you all my life, and I can't think of your name. What is it?" The second lady thought for a minute and said, "Do you need an answer right now?"

Not only can we forget who we are as individuals, we can forget as a church. I guess some things are unforgettable. But memory can be erased by the rush of events, by the passage of time or just by a loss of interest. That's a big reason we take time each year and do an elders report. It helps us remember who we are and what we're all about. And that's also why I chose to begin our series on 1 Corinthians today. You see, in the opening verses of this letter the apostle Paul is trying to get the church in Corinth to remember who they are. The fact is, they had forgotten.

Let me give you some background to this letter. What do we know about Corinth? Corinth was on a narrow neck of land in Greece with a harbor on each side of it. Because of its location it was a perfect crossroad between east and west, as well as the southern and northern parts of Greece. In Paul's day, Athens was like a sleepy university town while Corinth was a booming metropolis. Its population was close to 100,000. Reading about ancient Corinth I'm struck at the parallels with the Bay Area. It was a major center for international trade; a busy, bustling, cosmopolitan business center. Tourists flocked to Corinth for events like the Isthmian Games, held every two years in a massive stadium. A huge theater that sat 18,000 brought the best drama and musical entertainment. Corinth was rich in natural resources. It was nicknamed "wealthy Corinth" not because everyone was wealthy, but many became wealthy there. It's no surprise that the dominant cultural traits of the people of Corinth were competitiveness, self-sufficiency, personal freedom and pride in the attainment of knowledge. They were also pluralistic with a variety of religious expressions. The massive hill overlooking the city was the site of a temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, where hundreds of cult prostitutes offered their services. It's no wonder that the Greek word meaning "Corinthian girl" was slang for a loose woman.

Paul came to this city on his second missionary journey in about 50-51 A.D. You can read about his time in Corinth in Acts 18. He spent a year and a half there, working as a tentmaker and

preaching the good news about Jesus. As a result, a church sprang up that was full of life, but also full of problems. After Paul left Corinth he went to Ephesus where he heard reports of all the different issues they were facing. The church was divided with different groups claiming a superior spirituality based on their leader. They sued each other in secular courts. There was a man sleeping with his father's wife. People were getting drunk at communion. Their worship service was a free for all of individual expression with people speaking in tongues and barking out prophecies whenever they wanted. That's why I've called this series "crazychurch"!

So a couple of years after leaving Corinth, Paul wrote them this letter to address these issues. You might imagine that Paul was pretty ticked off; time for a kick in the pants! But as Paul starts out this letter, he doesn't rebuke them. Instead, he reminds them of who they are. Why? Because apparently they had forgotten. Listen to how he begins.

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Corinthians 1:1–9).

As a church, don't forget who you are

On the surface this looks like a conventional way to start a letter. Letters in Paul's day started with the writer identifying himself as Paul does here. Then he'd give some sort of greeting like "grace and peace" as he also does here. Finally, the writer would express thanksgiving, and Paul does that, too. He follows a conventional form, but what he fills that form with is anything but conventional. He fills it with several reminders of who they are: seven things. And these things tell us who we are as well.

We're the church of God

He writes this to *"the church of God which is in Corinth."* We're the church of God in Foster City and Millbrae. The problem was some of the Corinthians said they belonged to Paul, others to Peter, still others to a guy named Apollos. Paul says, "You're all wrong. You belong to God. You're His. And not just some of you who think you're really spiritual, but all of you." CPC doesn't belong to me or to the elders. This church doesn't belong to you. This church belongs to God. Don't forget that.

We've been called by God

The word "called" or "calling" is found several times here. In v. 1 Paul says he was *"called as an apostle by the will of God."* Paul and the other 11 apostles had a unique calling. Some people in Corinth questioned Paul's apostleship so he reminds them he didn't apply for this job. He was called into it by God. But the apostles weren't the only ones who are called. We're all called. In v. 2 he calls the Corinthians *"saints by calling."* That's true of every single one of us who follow Christ. We've all been called as saints. Then later down in v. 9 he says *"we were called into fellowship with His Son."* That's true of all of us as well. What we are as believers didn't happen because of anything we did; it happened because God called us. We can't take any credit for what we are. Jesus said, *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me..."* (Jn 10:27). That's our calling.

We've been set apart by God

Paul describes the church as those *"who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus."* That word "sanctified" is one of those weird religious words we don't use today. But what it meant back then was to be set apart for special, holy use. It's kind of like when you have a piece of nice jewelry, maybe an heirloom; you don't just wear it everyday. You set it apart for a special occasion. Paul says, "You are holy. You've been set apart by God." It's not something you earned. It's something God did to you. Holiness isn't something achieved but rather received. As believers we strive to grow into what we are, but in a sense we can never be more holy than we are now because we were set apart as holy the day we believed.

We're part of the larger family of God

Paul says this is true not just of you, but *"all who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours."* The Corinthians thought they were the coolest Christians on the planet; the center of the religious universe. They might have acknowledged that there were "legit" Christians in other places, but they weren't as spiritually sophisticated as they were in Corinth. Paul says, "You got it wrong. You don't have a monopoly on Jesus. He's "their Lord and ours." It's important to know who we are, but it's also important to know who others are.

Sometimes we get snobby. We get snobby in our church when we think we do it all right and other churches are still in the dark

ages. We even get snobby as Bay Area Christians. Lynn and I were driving from Chicago to Nashville this summer and went through southern Indiana. Lots of corn fields! We got hungry so we stopped for a "healthy" meal at Cracker Barrel. Have you ever eaten at Cracker Barrel? Don't go there unless you're prepared to eat a million calories for lunch. You won't find one piece of food that doesn't have melted cheese or gravy on it! And it's a cultural experience. We sat there and looked at all the people and it was very clear we weren't in the Bay Area. Needless to say these were a sophisticated group. It was easy to feel kind of superior. We do that as Christians as well. Paul corrects us and says he is *"their Lord and ours."*

We're recipients of the grace (gifts) of God

In v. 4 Paul thanks God *"for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus."* Normally we think of grace in terms of salvation by grace. But that's not what Paul is thinking of here. He's thinking grace in terms of spiritual gifts. The word "grace" is the Greek word *charis* and the word for spiritual gifts is *charismata*, so these concepts are closely related. Spiritual gifts are grace-gifts. That's why Paul goes on to say in v. 5, *"that in everything you were enriched in him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift."* Paul wants to make sure they know these special abilities they're so proud of came from God. They're gifts of God's grace. They're nothing to boast about. But you don't want to deny them either.

Each of us has been gifted by God and we need to have an understanding of what those gifts are and begin to use them. I was talking to Sandy Hughes this week about our need for Sunday morning small group leaders to serve in our elementary grades here in Foster City. We have about 180 kids in Sunday School each week here. We need 14 small group leaders for grades 1-4. We have less than half of those jobs filled. I have a hard time believing that in a church of over 2,000 people we don't have 14 people gifted by God to make an eternal impact on these kids. But when we forget who we are, when we forget that we've all been given these grace-gifts, then we see needs like this go unmet.

We'll be completed by God

Paul says in v. 7 we're *"awaiting the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, who will confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful..."* We wait for the full unveiling of Jesus in this world. The day will come when the curtain is rolled back and everyone will see who he truly is. But sometimes we wonder. Will I make it? Will I fall so far into sin and somehow not be ready for his coming? Paul says, "You might not always be faithful but God is faithful. God will confirm you to the end. He won't quit on you. When Christ appears you'll be blameless in his sight because you'll be covered with his righteousness

which he's given to you by his grace." Do you know that? Are you fearful of his coming or do you long for it? Have you forgotten that *"he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Phil 1:6).

We've been called into fellowship with Jesus

That's the last thing Paul says. That's what he leaves us with. Normally when we hear the word "fellowship" we think of our fellowship with one another. But there's another kind of fellowship that's even sweeter—fellowship with God's Son, Jesus. Remember how Jesus put it in John 14, *"You in me and I in you."* There is a union, an intimacy, a sharing in the life of Jesus that defines who we are.

Have you ever noticed how people give themselves away by what they go on and on talking about, sometimes to the point of obsession? It doesn't take long before you see pretty clearly what's really at the center of their life. I like to talk about sports. I'm passionate about college football and the Giants and especially my kids and the teams they play on. Well, if you wondered what Paul was excited about, what was at the center of his thoughts and words, notice how in this first paragraph one name keeps coming up over and over again. The center of his life and words is quite simply Jesus. The name Jesus Christ shows up eight times in nine verses. When Paul said "Christ" what he really meant was "King." Paul couldn't stop talking about King Jesus. Paul wants us to know that in terms of who we are King Jesus is at the center of our story: past, present and future. Our past: we've been set apart by King Jesus; we've been called into fellowship with King Jesus. Our present: we're enriched in King Jesus; we're not lacking in any gift; we're fully equipped to serve him. Our future:

we're waiting for the unveiling of King Jesus when we'll be found blameless.

This is the secret to why Paul could start this letter on such a positive note. Remember, this church was a mess. These people were a mess. But Paul starts this letter to them and refuses to bring any of that up. He'll deal with some hard things later on in the letter, but for now he affirms them and reminds them who they are because of King Jesus. Their story has become part of his story.

How about you? Can you delight in and thank God for those believers around you who you disagree with or who annoy you or who are spiritually immature or who continually fall into sin? The only way we can do that is if we see them through the lens of all that King Jesus has done not only for us but for them. If we do that as a church in the coming year, if we remember not only who we are but who those around us are, we will have to start our south campus earlier rather than later because there won't be enough seats here or at Mills High School to hold us all.

Conclusion

CPC, don't forget who you are. Don't forget who the people sitting next to you are. You're the church of God. You've been called by God and set apart for him. He's placed you in a family of brothers and sisters who call on his name. He's graced you with gifts to serve him with. He's promised to see you through to the end. Until then, let your fellowship with King Jesus define you. Let your story become a part of his story.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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