

1 Corinthians 1:4-9 Paul's encouragement as we look ahead.

Be Thankful for What God Gives

Most of us will know something about the Corinthian Church - that it was immature in many ways, and not behaving in a way that honoured God.

The purpose of Paul's first letter to them was to bring some correction, so there were some hard words on the way.

Yet it was always Paul's habit to "accentuate the positive" - to encourage and praise those he worked with and cared for, and this letter was no exception. Even though this would primarily be a letter of reproof, Paul began it with a section of praise.

Some commentators have actually questioned Paul's sincerity in this section - suggesting he is buttering them up - given the problems he would be dealing with in the body of the letter. But when we read the verses more carefully we see Paul's focus is genuinely on what God has done in the lives of the Corinthian believers. These brief words about what God had called them to become would be a great source of encouragement as they dealt with the burden of their shortcomings.

Paul made several statements of thanksgiving for what God had done in them. As we look at them this morning, I hope they might be an encouragement for us - even though we don't need the correction the Corinthian Church did.

First, Paul says to them, you're the object of God's love and grace! He talks in v 4, about "*The grace of God which was given to you*" Grace, we know, means God's unmerited and undeserved favour and good will.

Sometimes even those who have been Christians a long time, can find themselves inadvertently trying to earn God's favour, because this mindset is so ingrained in our culture: we're taught from birth that get what we deserve.

Behind every effort to try to impress God is the feeling that God will not love us the way we are. But the greatest discovery in life is that nothing in our minds or hearts or actions is hidden from God, and He still loves us.

Regardless of who we are, or how long our Christian journey has been; regardless of how mature or immature we think we are as Christians, or how gifted or not we think we are, *we have received the grace of God*. No one is more important than another in God's church, as each and every one of us is here because of the grace and love of God.

Second, Paul tells the Corinthians, Christ has brought you spiritual riches. When Paul says "*in every way you have been enriched in him*" (v. [1Co 1:5](#)), he was speaking of the relationship we have with God - the riches of being forgiven and cleansed and embraced; of being invited to know God; of being filled with and gifted by the Holy Spirit, who in the past was only available to special people at special times. As Christians, we are heirs of the Father - joint heirs with Christ. He is our brother. We are children of God. We are royalty! Think about that.

In one of his parables, Jesus spoke critically of the farmer who hoarded his material wealth and was not "rich toward God" ([Luk 12:21](#)). The themes of spiritual bankruptcy and spiritual wealth are very prominent in the Bible, and for good reason.

The Corinthians lived in a society that produced great material wealth but that created spiritually bankrupt people.

In any society that prioritises making money and having fun there is a constant deterioration in the quality of life. The worth of self and of people diminishes and the quality of relationships deteriorates.

In a society like that, the distinctions between right and wrong fade and values become distorted; social pressure toward evil emerges. This was precisely the mood and pattern of life in first-century Corinth, but it is also a pretty good description of most cities in the world today.

I've been aghast - and angry - at the Brazilian president's attitude towards the Amazon rainforest. His policies are all about making money short term, which is typical of so many governments' value systems right now - including our own! A new Royal Commission into bushfires? They haven't fully implemented the recommendations from the previous Royal Commissions. What's the point of another one - other than to placate an increasingly mutinous public and to line the pockets of government officials! Pardon my venting...

Paul's claim is that in a world of such spiritual poverty Christ has enriched the lives of those he is writing to. The person that grasps the truth of God is truly rich.

Third, Paul says to his readers, God has given you great potential. Later in the letter Paul would devote three whole chapters to the understanding of gifts and their use in the church, but here in this early thanksgiving section he thanks God that they "*are not lacking in any spiritual gift*" ([1Co 1:7](#)).

He is trying to encourage them with the realisation that God has held back no gift that would help them to *do* His work and *be* His church in Corinth. Paul isn't suggesting that they are even aware of their gifts or have begun to develop them, but he wants them to see that by virtue of having accepted Christ, they have received special gifts. One of the great insights of the Scripture that we need to be aware of - and to claim - is that God has already given us the gifts which we need to do His will.

This parish is about to move into a new chapter with a new leader. It's an opportunity to dream together again, and look at what it means to be God's people in this place at this time.

As God gives his church the gifts they need for the work he calls them to do, if gifts are missing in a particular area, then it makes sense not to try and do things which require those gifts. It is better to minister in another area where there are gifts and resources. If we find increasingly that there are no volunteers to do something we've always done - then stop doing it. God will have something else in mind.

A good question to ask is, "Has God given any of us a special dream for the future of our church? Is there something we would like to see the church do in the name of Christ that it has never done before?"

If there is a yes to that question - and there is a group of people who are gifted and resourced enough to do it (that's the key) - then that is the way God is leading. Go for it.

This community of faith already has the gifts and abilities it needs to fulfil God's plan in this place. Often the dreams he plants in us will reflect this.

Fourth, says Paul, God has given you a basis of hope. Even in his greeting Paul reminds his friends of the ultimate hope they have in Jesus Christ.

But what Paul does, by beginning with this focus, is to set the problems which the Corinthian Christians faced at that time, in the context of eternity. He wanted them to be "*blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*" ([1Co 1:8](#)). He says that the basis of their hope, was not their good works but the fact that "*God is faithful*" ([1Co 1:9](#)).

I think we can sometimes get a bit discouraged by our inadequacies as a church, and lose sight of the ultimate victory we have in Christ. We look around us and see the hemorrhaging of young people, and the ageing of our congregation. We wonder how we can keep going sometimes, as increasingly, there are not the people on the ground, or the financial resources, to support the ministries we'd like to see happening.

I recently came across a story about a minister and his grandmother. The minister tells how he spent many hours with her as a boy. He says how she loved to read, and he would often go to the local library and take out a book for her, by one of her favourite authors. But every time he brought her a book, she would open it to the last chapter and read that first.

The minister found this somehow upsetting because it seemed to him that this would take all the fun out of reading the book. One day he was annoyed enough to ask her why she always read the last chapter first. Without hesitation she said, "If I don't like the way a book ends, I don't see any sense wasting my time reading it."

Thinking about that, there's a sense in which we need to be like that grandmother. We need to focus on the last chapter, because it tells us how things will turn out.

There is a kind of spiritual hand-wringing that goes on at times that suggests that the Church is a lost cause. There are those who feel that the trends we are experiencing in the Church at present are permanent; that they herald its demise.

The hope of the Christian is based on the action of God and allows us to believe that whatever the present circumstances might be there will come a day when life will overcome death, when love will overcome hate, when good will overcome evil, and the kingdom of God will triumph over the kingdoms of this world.

We know what's in our last chapter, and this means that we can live in the present with confidence - even if our church is not quite everything we'd like it to be right now.

In these verses, Paul wanted to assure his Corinthian friends right in the beginning that their future was as secure as the promises of God. Our future is just as sure.

This means that we simply move forward in faith, using the gifts that God has placed among us, being faithful in love and in service, and trusting that our church here, and God's Church in this world, are in his hands, and will ultimately flourish as His Kingdom is fully established among us.

Let's pray