

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

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[0:00] Let's take your seats. Turn back in 1 Corinthians, page 952 of the Black Church.! Let's pray one more time as we come to God's Word. Father, in these moments we would ask that you would speak by that word that you have inspired and that we would hear and that by the same Spirit who inspired your word, we would be heard.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. There's something in all of us that really desires to be well thought of and to be respectable to those around us and to have a good reputation, not to be that guy or that girl or a bit odd.

And in this day and age, the unfortunate truth is that that makes being a Christian really difficult. We wish it wasn't the case, but it is the fact that the one we follow was rejected and mocked and beaten and eventually killed.

And he tells us that if we are going to belong to him, if we're going to follow him faithfully and obediently, we will have to walk the same path. Anyone who comes after me must take up his cross.

That is, he must do the same things that I did as I followed the path of obedience to my Father. Well, that's a bracing way to begin this morning.

[1:38] But it is true. It is true. If anyone will come after me, Jesus says, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. And the problem we have with that is that the draw to respectability, the draw to being well thought of and liked and respected and appreciated by those around us, it's so strong.

We don't want to be thought of as weird or, as the culture would have it now, bigoted. That's what we're told. The culture may, well, it will always invent another slur that will be unpleasant.

And because of that, we try to fit in as much as we can. We try and make sure that we don't stand out. We try and be respectable. That's been the case with the church and our nation for a while now.

We say to the world, we say to our neighbors, we say to our friends, don't think that I'm one of those kind of Christians, whatever those kind of Christians are. Look, look, I do all the same things you do.

I'm very much like you. We have the same values. Our children are very similar. It's just that I have some private beliefs about God that are really no different from the private beliefs that you have about whatever it is you believe.

[2:47] The UK church has managed to spin what Jesus calls us to such that the life of the cross that we say that we walk actually looks a lot like the lives that our neighbors and our work colleagues live.

And so, we turn to the church at Corinth. We're going to be here over the coming weeks, months probably, and what we realize is that their situation is not as unfamiliar to us as it should be.

So, by way of context, Corinth is an impressive city. It's cosmopolitan. It's wealthy. It's important. And the church in Corinth wants a Christianity that fits in with that. Cosmopolitan, wealthy, important, well-thought-of Christianity.

They love this church, loves influential people who do business and socialize in the right places.

That's chapters 8 and 10, 8, 9, and 10. And they're embarrassed about weakness and ordinariness in the eyes of the world.

If we're honest, we're just the same. We want an impressive Christianity that impressive people will embrace. Think about the fuss that we make when famous people or impressive people show any

kind of interest in Christianity.

[3:59] Think about how much we'll suck up to famous people when they express an interest in our gospel. Corinth wants to identify with the right kind of leaders. And because of that, factions have crept in to the church.

Chapter 3, I follow Paul. I follow Apollos. Well, we have the cult of the leader everywhere today. Whether it's sport or politics or online personalities, and the church has its celebrity culture as well. Because of the online availability of big names all over the place, I follow dot, dot, dot, whoever your minister of choice is. Individualism and the pursuit of personal pleasure. They're rife in Corinth, especially when it comes to sex and marriage. Chapters 6 and 7 make that clear. In fact, Aristophanes coined the term Corinthian to describe sexual immorality. Well, in our day, our state church seems to be happy with all kinds of deviancy and perversion. And we know it's not just there. It's everywhere. Then there are divisions in society between rich and poor.

[5:10] And those divisions that are out there have come into the church as well. As has the Corinthian confusion about gender. Chapter 11, we'll get there, Lord willing, in a few weeks' time.

And the church is also divided about the gifts that God has given them. Chapters 12 to 14. They behave like there's an elite group in the church. Special group. And then there are the rest. They believe that that sort of in crowd and outsider thing is something that God promotes. God blesses some people in a particular way and the rest will their second rate. It's simply the elitism of Corinthian culture that has come into the church and been baptized in spiritual language. This church, the church in Corinth, is an example of what happens when your desire for respectability with the watching world, acceptability in the eyes of those around you, is allowed to run and run.

When the church looks the same as the world. And the letter to the Corinthian church, this 1 Corinthians, is what the Apostle Paul writes to challenge that state of affairs.

[6:19] To challenge that mindset and to course correct. And to encourage them to do that, to do it urgently. He speaks very directly. It's clear there's been some dialogue between them before this letter.

We think this is actually the second letter. And then 2 Corinthians is the fourth letter. So there's a first and a third. These are the ones we have. There's been dialogue before. And it's clear that he's responding in some ways to questions that they've asked.

But because he knows that this overriding issue, where their desire for acceptability in the eyes of Corinthian culture, has seeped so much into the church and caused so much compromise. Because he realizes that that is so serious, he speaks very directly. He doesn't mince his words. And he wants them to act decisively. He's not saying, here are a few suggestions. This is not great over here.

Maybe you could do that over there. No, he speaks directly. He calls them to repent. He calls them to change their behavior. And he calls them to do it now. Now, we'll see all of that unfold, Lord willing, over the course of this letter and these studies on Sunday mornings.

[7:26] But with all that said, he starts his letter with a surprise. You see, given what I've just highlighted about the state of the church, how would you begin if you were writing a letter to them?

How would you start? Perhaps you'd say, I've seen all these things. Cut it out. Stop it. I wonder if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian.

If you were going to write a letter to people like that, what would you say? You'd say, you're a load of hypocrites. In fact, the Lord Jesus uses language like that to people who are outwardly religious, but inwardly they are self-serving.

He uses that language in the Gospels. It would be a fair thing to level at the church in Corinth in many ways. Maybe you wouldn't say anything. Maybe you'd shake your head and you'd walk away thinking that you were right all along.

There is actually nothing in this Christian thing. You see, the Christians, they say they're Christians, but they're no different to anybody else. If that's you, I want to encourage you this morning to stick with this sermon series in 1 Corinthians and listen in to how the apostle addresses these

hypocritical Christians.

[8:39] But I would also encourage you to look around this church. Look around this church here because I hope, broadly speaking, you won't see these problems here. What you'll see is a group of flawed people, yes, sinful people, but who, because they know that they are flawed and sinful, because we know that that's how we are, well, we're repentant.

And we don't glorify in the sin the way the Corinthians were doing. I want to encourage you to listen to what the apostle Paul tells the Corinthians to do, what he calls them to, and see if you can see that around here at IPC Ealing.

However you would start the letter, Paul must, he surely starts in a surprising place. Look at verse 1. Paul, Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and our brother Sosthenes, 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.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ. That's actually a remarkable opening from the apostle Paul.

See, despite all the sin, despite all the compromise that he is going to go on to call out, he starts with God's grace to them. He starts with God's grace to this group of people that have wandered so far, and he does, he reminds them of two things.

[10:09] And that's our first point is this. He reminds them of their status, who they are. He reminds them of their status, who they are. They are the church of God. They are chosen by Him in verse 2, sanctified in Christ Jesus. Sanctified means set apart. They are set apart in Christ. They are united to Him, and therefore they are declared to be righteous before God.

Jesus' death and resurrection have been credited to them. They are forgiven their sins. They are cleansed. They are renewed. They have been declared to be holy. As part of that new status, they are then, verse 2, called to be saints. To be a saint is to be holy. They have been set apart to be holy. They have been called to be holy. For Paul, to be a saint is a Christian, nothing more. So, they're called to be Christians together with all who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, do you see, just as Paul was called to be an apostle of Christ, verse 1, in that encounter with the Lord Jesus on the Damascus road, so the Corinthians have been called to be saints.

Paul did not achieve his apostleship, and the Corinthians did not achieve their status as holy. The way it works is that when someone calls on the name of the Lord Jesus, it shows that God has called them. Salvation is always God's work. We respond, we answer, we repent of our sins, we believe, we call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, but only because God has first changed our hearts. And we should note also that the root of the word here for sanctified and saints are variations of the name of the Holy Spirit. Paul is saying that when someone calls on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, God is at work, and God's Holy Spirit is self-evidently present, therefore, in their life together.

So, can you see, Paul is starting with their status as a way of reminding this church the astonishing grace that they have been shown by God? But he starts here also because of the responsibility that comes with that calling. God chose these people to be saints. He chose them to be His holy ones, those who were set apart and distinctive. That's what it means to be holy. It is to be distinctive in the way that you live. It is to be different from those around us who don't know the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:54] Not everyone in this city had known the blessing of Christ's grace, but those who did now come under His Lordship. When you receive His grace and you confess His name, you come under His Lordship in your life in a personal way. That means simply this, the Lord Jesus Christ owns His people.

It's a very unpopular thing to suggest to a culture that thinks we shouldn't be owned by anybody, we shouldn't be mastered by anything. But actually, Christ owns His people. When someone is, verse 9, called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, they are united to Him. Putting our faith in Jesus connects us to Jesus, and it means that we are called to live accordingly. We are called to live by His ways, His rules, His plans. In fact, this will be the basis of all the rebukes that

Paul gives in his letter. He's saying, stop behaving like this. He calls out a sin. He says, stop it. Why? Because you belong to Christ. There is a special bond. Theologians call it the mystical union between Christ and His people. He is the head, and we are His body. So, in this union, in this connection, we don't just take the name Christian with us wherever we go. There's a sense in which we take Him with us as well. We are united to Him in this mystical, mysterious way. And what it means is that He is in charge. We take Him with us, but not as we might take our pet with us for a walk. We take Him with us, and He is in charge. He sets the course. He is Lord. By starting with God's grace, Paul is both reminding the Corinthians of the incredible blessing that they have received. But He is calling them to live accordingly. If you have received Christ's grace, your status is that you are holy. You have been set apart for Him. But that also means that He has total claim over your life, every square inch. Now, it is vital that we get it this way around. He calls, He sets apart, and we respond. Now, Paul will speak to this church very harshly in places, but in order that they will be able to hear these rebukes, they first need to hear these assurances. [15:26] And that's true for all of us. You see, you will only hear, we will only hear a rebuke against our ungodliness.

We will only hear a call to change our lives and live in obedience if we have first heard the word of comfort and assurance from God. God's word always delivers grace before correction. Again, Paul is saying, you've had all the grace. You belong to Jesus. So, stop living like that's not true. And I want us to hear Him on this too. If you are naming Christ, but you are choosing the respectability of the culture such that you disobey Christ. If you call yourself a Christian, but you're persisting in some unrepentant sin, stop. Why should you stop? Because you received Christ's gracious salvation. He has been so kind to you. But that also means that you belong to Him. You have a new status. You have a new identity. I've used this illustration before, but in order to grasp this, think about it in terms of the way it is for a child who is adopted. Some of you have experienced this, you know what I'm talking about. The child is taken out of one usually awful situation and they are brought into a new family. And in that new family, they receive love and they receive blessing and more kindness than they could ever have known before they were adopted. And they take the new family name and they are expected to abide by the new family rules. No, you don't do that because hunters don't behave that way. Hunters behave in a different way. [17:22] And often with adopted children, their past means that their bad behavior is a means of protection. So they'll steal their new siblings food. It used to be that they didn't know when another meal was coming and so they needed to take care of themselves. So what does their father say now? He says, no, you don't do that. Why? Because you have no need. You have no reason to live that way. In this place, you are loved and protected and we will always provide for you. You see what's happening there? The new identity means that there is a new behavior that's expected and the bad behavior that used to belong in the old identity, when it comes through, it is corrected because you don't need to live that way in the new world. And it's like that for us as Christians. Paul is talking to the Corinthians in this way. It is vital that we see this. You have no good reason to sin. There is nothing to be gained by choosing the world's respectability over Christ. He has blessed you beyond measure. You are in fellowship with the living God. It's an astonishing thing.

And you are the recipient of grace and mercy in abundance. And because of that grace and mercy, He has promised that He will steer you through all the way to glory. You don't need to live like that that belongs to the old identity because God is gracious to you. He loves you and He will give you all that you need. And to choose the alternative, well, that's out of step with your profession of Christ and your status as a saint. By the way, again, if you're not a Christian, can I say it's vital that you understand this order as well. Grace comes before instruction. You receive the grace from God and He instructs you on how to live. Jesus doesn't ask you to clean up your life in order to come to Him. He says, come to me in faith. Receive the free gift. Receive the grace of salvation. Let me take your guilt. Let me take your shame. Let me take all of the shortcomings and let me give you new life. There's an open invite. Grace upon grace upon grace.

[19:41] So, Paul starts by reminding the Corinthians who they are. But God has blessed them even more than that. It's not just their status. Secondly, point number two, He reminds them of their gifts.

He reminds them of their status, who they are. Secondly, He reminds them of their gifts, what they have. I give thanks, verse 4, I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 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. God is faithful. One of the ways that Paul can see so clearly that the Corinthians belong to God is the presence of God's gifting among them in their knowledge of the gospel and their ability to teach others. Paul can thank God because this church lacks nothing, He said. They lack nothing in terms of His gift. And He's saying, when I see the gifts, it confirms that He has been gracious to you. Going a step further, because this is evident, Paul then says, having started this work in them, God will continue it to completion and get them safely to glory. The church might look like a complete shambles, and Paul is going to tackle the mess head on.

He'll call them carnal in chapter 3 rather than spiritual, saying you're more worldly than you are spiritual. He will go for that, but that doesn't take away from the height of these introductory words. The Corinthians have been richly gifted by God, and this shows that He is at work in them, and when God starts a work, He finishes it. Did you hear how cumbersome it sounded? Paul trips over himself to keep naming Jesus, Jesus Christ, our Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus, that you have in Christ, in Jesus Christ.

[21:39] They're in Christ, and Christ is in them. And that is another way of encouraging the change their ways, both positively. He's saying you've been gifted so much, blessing on blessing. Why would you throw it back in His face? But also negatively. He's saying when Christ is in you, and He has gifted you, and He will then do what it takes to get you to the end, persisting in sin is actually a dangerous thing to do. Now, it is possible, I suppose, that some of the Corinthians didn't realize they were sinning with such a high hand. Being divisive isn't always obvious. You might not realize that taking other believers to a secular court is wrong. If you're enmeshed in the culture, what you think is normal will be skewed, for sure. So, Paul is saying, if Christ is in you, and He appears to be in you, I can see that in the way that you're gifted, don't do these things, because you're inviting the refining of the Lord as He prepares you for the last day. What he's saying, in a sense, is leave the sin behind you so that the Lord doesn't have to knock it out of you along the way. Repent now so that He doesn't have to get to work and make it more painful for you. It's the grace of discipline.

Chosen by the living God. Set apart for the living God. By the living God. This is where Paul starts, with this church that has now wandered away in all kinds of ways and is wayward.

As we think about that for ourselves, here are three implications. First is this. Don't think that it can't happen to us. Don't think that this kind of compromise can't happen to us. The Corinthians are an example of how far you can fall. They were so blessed, so gifted, but now they are so unholy. We'll read bits of this letter and we'll think, what were they thinking?

That's ridiculous. I would never do anything like that. The truth is we're all experts in justifying our own sin. We know about that at a small level, how we can justify our behavior in certain ways, both to ourselves and to others, but we can do it in big ways as well. There's probably a time when the guy in chapter 5 who is sleeping with a stepmother would have said to you, excuse me, you're insane to suggest that I would ever do something like that. Now he's meeting with a minister and he's saying, look, I know it's not great, but have you seen stepmoms of TikTok?

There was possibly a time when the church would have dealt decisively with this sort of sin as they're called to do in chapter 5, but now they're, well, you know, we're all about grace and stuff.

[24:39] Don't be complacent about sin. I hope we'll see as we go through, that's one of the big lessons of the book, one of the big pastoral lessons of the book for us. Don't be complacent about sin.

Listen, don't treat God's grace with contempt. Don't think that it can't happen to you. Second big implication is on the one hand, I suppose we're taking sin seriously. Don't think that it can't happen to us, but then don't think that there's no way back.

Don't think that there's no way back. One of the aims of this letter is to restore these wandering saints. Yes, they have wandered away, and in some cases they have wandered quite a way.

But one of the points of this letter is that you can fall a very long way and still get back. That's not to encourage you. It's not to encourage you to wander and think, well, let's see how far we can go. Not at all. But it is to say to those of you that think that you've blown it, you haven't.

If you think that you've blown it, you haven't. If you're ensnared by hidden sin and you think either that you can't leave it behind or that because you've sinned so badly that God won't have you back and therefore if you can't have God, well, that's all you have left and you're going to stay in your sin because it's the only thing that you have, God will have you back. Turn from it and come back to Him. Or if you've fallen into obvious sin and you're consumed with guilt, you can come back.

[26:16] So come back. Don't hang about. Come back to Christ. Come back to Christ now. And think about it. Think about it in the context of what we were just saying. If you belong to Christ, He will bring you back because, verse 9, God is faithful. But the longer you wait to respond, the more sin you will have to repent of, the more shame will have accumulated, and the more regret you'll feel when you finally do come back. Don't let failure and shame keep you from Christ. Don't let failure and shame keep you from Christ. If you can hear my voice this morning, you can come back. Come back. Come back to Christ now.

Don't think it can't happen to us. Don't think there's no way back. And then thirdly, don't think the Christian life is all or nothing. What I mean is this. The way some of us are wired, we need things to be perfect. And if they're not perfect, they're terrible. There are only two options in life, all or nothing. And that means we want the church to have tidy, clear edges, Christian, not Christian, in, out. Only God knows where those edges actually are. And His work in us over a lifetime is very slow. It's slow the way yeast works through bread. It's slow the way a mustard seed grows to be the biggest tree in the world. That is why churches get messy, even messy in the sort of shameful ways that we see in Corinth. We read this letter and we write them off. We think of the Corinthian church negatively, defined by their present sin, but it's not all or nothing.

Repentance is possible. Change happens. Grace works its way in and is seen as it is lived out.

Don't be a perfectionist. There's only one who is perfect. And to seek to be... If you're a perfectionist, you're seeking to be like the perfect one, and only He is perfect, and that's the sin of the garden wanting to be like God. Don't be a perfectionist. It will crush you, or it'll make you unbearable, or both. Trust God with His slow, faithful work in you and in your brothers and sisters in the church. We might know the Corinthian church by its sin, but Paul starts this letter with their true status. And like any Christian, they aren't defined by their sin. They're defined by the fact that they are sanctified in Christ. These first nine verses in this letter aren't just opening pleasantries. He's just not flattering them, buttering them up, something like that. It is actually the foundation of everything else. This is the true status of who this church is. This is the ground of everything else that He's going to say to them. So, with that in mind, don't settle for cultural respectability when you've been called into fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Go to Him.

Stick with Him, because God is faithful. Let's pray.