

1 Corinthians 1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 October 2021

Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] Please take your seats. It's very good to be with you this evening as we gather here. Trinity West Church are gathering just down the road in Shepherd's Bush praying for us.! We delight to be able to pray for IPC Ealing and to have this gospel partnership. Please turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, the passage that was read earlier in the service.

We'll consider together in this time these first nine verses. The pressing question for us in these days is, what do you do when the church, when your Christian faith and the culture collide? It's a pressing question for us because the church, I think, in our day is waking up to the hostility that we face in our culture at this particular moment. You see, in a few short decades, many of you won't need me to tell you this, but in a few short decades, it has gone from being the case that the church was seen in the culture as a positive thing, as a cause for good, as if you had put church member on your CV when applying for a job, it may have served you well.

It has gone from there to really being a bit of an irrelevance to a completely new phase in the last number of years, and that is that the church, the Christian faith, Christians, Christianity is dangerous.

There's a lot of culture, isn't there at the moment, but nobody in this moment is saying, hey, why don't we ask the Christians what they think?

[1 : 45] Nobody, as they seek answers for the problems that we face in our society, are saying, do you know what? I reckon it would be really helpful if we turned to the ancient truths of the Bible to look for answers to this kind of cultural chaos we're in.

No, quite the opposite. We're told we've moved on. We've moved on from that. That belongs in the dark ages. We've moved on. So let men use ladies' changing rooms.

Let 12-year-olds overrule their parents when it comes to a decision about a vaccine. That's progress. We've moved on. It's all right. We've got this.

We can sort this out ourselves. And then some brave soul dissents. Some brave soul, trembling knees, puts up their hand and says, I'm a Christian, and I can't go with this.

This isn't right. And what happens? They must be shut up and shut out. See, we're just bad. We're bad for women, bad for children, bad for society, bad for progress, bad, bad, bad.

[2 : 59] And of course, in this part of the world where we live, in this city, we feel this more acutely because this kind of hostility is concentrated in cities.

It has always been that way. Cosmopolitan, influential, important places like London. So what do you do? What do you do in a context like that?

You face a simple choice. You face a simple choice. You either go with the culture or you go with God's Word. There is no third way.

It's one or the other. And that brings us to the church in Corinth. Because, as many of you will know, the Corinthian here is a church in a cosmopolitan, wealthy, important, influential city that is struggling with exactly the same kind of cultural pressure.

And if you know anything about this letter, you know that they aren't doing well. And so the Apostle Paul has written to them to correct them. Paul's tone is quite direct at times.

[4 : 11] And there is definitely a bit of tension in the relationship between the Apostle and this church. But it looks, as you read the letter of 1 Corinthians, like what has happened in the church is that this church has stopped being in the culture.

Rather, the culture is now in the church. And it is striking when you read the letter to see the similarities with our day. Corinth is impressive. As a place, it's impressive.

And so the Christians in Corinth want their Christianity to fit with that vibe. They love influential people. They love people who do business and socialize in the right places.

Chapters 8 to 10 deal with that. Now, isn't that what we want in our day? Deep down, actually, our instincts are that we're embarrassed about our weakness in the world's eyes.

But chapter 4 tells us that Christ-like weakness is our model. There is no Christian faith without Christ-like weakness. The Corinthians are fixated on identifying with the right leaders.

[5 : 16] And factions have grown up because of this. I follow Paul. I follow Apollos. We have the cult of the leader everywhere in our culture today. In politics, in sport, in online personalities.

And it's in the church as well. I follow fill-in-the-blank of your favorite celebrity preacher. And the triumph of the idea that personal pleasure is the most important thing in life.

It's rife in Corinth. Now, that sounds very familiar to us, doesn't it? Especially when, in Corinth, the issue as it relates to sex and marriage.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with that. Corinth was known for this. So much so that Aristophanes coined the term Corinthian. And he coined that term to describe sexual immorality.

Back in the day, if a group of mates had planned a trip to Corinth, everybody knew what they had in mind. And, of course, the church in our day isn't excelling in these areas either.

[6 : 17] As it seems, one after another gives ground, gives way, gives up on God's word as it comes to the issues of sex and marriage. I heard a church leader in London say not so long ago, what people do in their bedrooms isn't the church's business.

Then the divisions in society between rich and poor have all come into the church in Corinth as well. As has the Corinthian confusion about gender. Chapter 11 deals with that.

And the church is also divided about the gifts that God has given them. That's perhaps what the Corinthian church is most famous for. Chapters 12 to 14. They behave like there's an elite group who are super spiritual and better than everybody else.

And then there's the rest. It seems that they have taken simply the superiority of the culture and the idea that there are the elites and the rest. They've taken that and they've just baptized it into the church.

Corinth are off track. And this letter is a course correction. When you read the letter, Paul has clearly been in dialogue with them before. He wrote this letter.

[7 : 23] Some of what he says is responding to questions that they have asked. But why do I give us that kind of overview of the letter? Well, because what I want us to see this evening is that Paul begins his correspondence to this confused and compromised church in a remarkable place.

He starts by reminding this church that they are. Here's my first point. Blessed by Christ. Point one, they are blessed by Christ. Look at verse 1.

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. On one level, this sounds a bit like any typical Pauline introduction to one of his letters.

So why is it so remarkable? Well, because of the emphasis on God's grace. Despite all the sin, despite all the disgraceful behavior that Paul is going to call this church on, he starts with God's grace to them in Christ.

[8 : 39] They are the church of God. I will say more a bit later on in the sermon on that. But this means that they are no ordinary group of people. They are chosen by God.

Verse 2, they are sanctified in Christ Jesus. Sanctified means set apart. They are set apart in Christ. They are united to Him. And they are declared righteous before God.

Jesus' death and resurrection has been credited to them. And they're forgiven. They're cleansed. They're renewed. They have been declared holy unto God.

And as part of that new status, they are called to live that out in practice. Called to be saints or literally holy ones.

For Paul, to be a saint is to be a Christian. Called to be Christian. Together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as Paul, verse 1, was called to be an apostle of Christ.

[9 : 44] You remember that famous dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road. Just as he was called to be an apostle, so the Corinthians have been called to be saints.

Paul did not achieve his apostleship. It was given to him. And the Corinthians did not achieve their status as holy. It was given to them as a gift. The way it works is that when someone calls on the

name of Christ, that is evidence that God has already called them.

Salvation is God's work. Yes, we respond. Yes, we answer. Yes, we call on Christ. When you call on Christ, you really call on Christ.

But you only do that because God has changed your heart. We should note that the root word here for sanctified and saints are variations of the name of the Holy Spirit.

What Paul is saying is that the Holy Spirit is self-evidently present in their life together. He is self-evidently present in the lives of these people that he's going to call on all of this sin and disgraceful behavior later in the letter.

[11 : 00] They are blessed by Christ. But the blessing doesn't stop there. Look at verse 4. He goes on, God has not simply, I could say simply, it's not simply at all, is it?

It's supernaturally incredible. But he has not merely saved them, set them apart as his, but he has also gifted them richly as well.

And he has confirmed his grace among them in their knowledge of the gospel and their ability to teach others. He's saying, you lack nothing in terms of gifts from God.

Going a step further, because this is evident, Paul can say that then having, as he sees the evidence of God's grace in their lives, he says that having started this work in them, God will continue to completion.

He will get them safely to glory. The Corinthian church might look like a complete shambles.

[12 : 23] If we were to look on at them and their relationships and the way that they're behaving, we'd be tempted to think that it's a complete mess. And Paul is going to tackle that mess head on in this letter.

He'll call them fleshly, carnal, rather than spiritual in chapter 3 because of the way that they're behaving. But that does not take away from the lofty heights of these words in this introduction.

They are blessed by Christ. Did you hear how cumbersome it sounded when the passage was read? Apostle of Christ Jesus, the church of God, sanctified in Christ Jesus, the name of our Lord Jesus, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus, Lord Jesus Christ, and so on and so on.

It's almost awkward the way he says it because he's tripping over himself to name Christ. They are in Christ, and Christ is in them.

So, what does that mean for us? The first thing I think it means is don't presume. Don't presume the Corinthians are an example.

[13 : 34] Of how far you can fall. You might read bits of this letter and think to yourself, That's absurd. I would never do that.

But we're all expert in justifying our sin. If we're honest with ourselves, we know that. Yeah, but. Ah, yeah, but. There was probably a time when the guy in chapter 5 that is mentioned there who is sleeping with his stepmother would have been horrified at the thought of doing something like that. And now he's meeting with the pastor and he's saying, Yeah, look, I know it's not great, but here's the thing. And there was possibly a time when the church would have dealt decisively with that issue.

If you read chapter 5, it's actually not the guy in sin that Paul is rebuking. It's the church for tolerating that behavior. And now at their members' meetings, they're talking about, Yeah, we don't want to judge.

It's complicated. And we're all about grace, aren't we? Don't presume, friends, that Christ's blessing means you can't fall into sin.

[14 : 44] Don't treat his grace with contempt. Don't presume. Don't despair.

You maybe think this evening that you have blown it. That you haven't. If you've come to church this evening and you're coddling some particular sin and you think either that you can't leave it behind, you can't let it go, or that actually it's all you've got because you know that God won't have you back, I want to tell you that you can and you must turn back to God.

Don't despair. If you've had a really clear and obvious fall into some sin or other and you're consumed by guilt, you can hardly hold your head up this evening.

You don't even know why you've come to church because it's just made the guilt feel worse. You can come back. You can have that guilt lifted. That burden can be taken away.

And I want to encourage you, if that's you, to come back and not to wait. Come back now. In the quietness of your own heart, turn to the Lord.

[16:33] Because the worst thing you can actually do is delay. Think about it. If you belong to Christ, He will bring you back because, verse 9, look, verse 9, God is faithful.

But the longer you wait to respond, the more sin you will have to repent of, the more shame you will accumulate, and the more regret you'll feel when you do finally come back. Don't delay, friend. Don't delay.

So don't despair. Don't let failure and shame keep you from Christ.

You can hear my voice this evening. You can come back to this grace. You can come back to this blessing. Let me encourage you to do that. Don't presume.

Don't despair. These verses tell us one other thing. Don't think that the Christian life is all or nothing. What I mean is, the way that some of us are wired, we need things to be perfect, and if they aren't perfect, they're terrible.

[17:34] It's one or the other. Got to be perfect or they're terrible. Only two options. All or nothing. And so we want the church. We want the church to have tidy, clear edges.

Christians here, non-Christians here. In, out. Now, those edges do exist, but only God knows where they are.

And His work in us over a lifetime is slow. That is why churches get messy. That's why churches even get messy in the sort of shameful ways we see in Corinth.

We read this letter and we write them off. If you know this letter, as I say, many of you will know it well. Your first thought when you think about Corinth is, disaster. We want to define the church negatively because of the presence of sin, but it's not all or nothing.

Repentance is possible. Change happens. Grace works its way in. It transforms people. And it is then seen in the way that it is lived out.

[18:44] Perfectionism in the Christian life. I think it's common in churches like ours, conservative, evangelical, reformed kinds of churches.

The thing is, perfectionism will crush you. It will crush you, and it will destroy the church. If you expect perfection of yourself, you will die a thousand times a week.

And if you expect it of others, you'll just become judgmental and nasty because they never measure up. We need to repent of our perfectionism. We need to pursue holiness, yes.

We need to repent of sin. We need to pursue holiness. We need to be holy as the Lord is holy. That sounds a lot like perfection to me, but that's different from perfectionism. Remember, it's not all or nothing.

Turn from perfectionism where you see it and trust God with the slow, faithful work in you and in your brothers and sisters in the church. So, we might know the Corinthian church by its sin, but Paul starts his letter with their true status.

[19:57] Like any Christian, like any Christian, the Corinthians aren't defined by their sin or by the fact that they are sanctified in Christ.

These aren't just opening pleasantries from the apostle. This is the true status of the church. They are blessed by Christ.

That isn't all that there is to say because with this blessing comes a responsibility. Those who are blessed by Christ, also, point number two, belong to Christ.

Blessed by Christ, belong to Christ. 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.

The Corinthian church is God's church. He brought it into being by His gracious choosing of these people to be saints. He conferred the status of Holy One on these people.

[21:04] To be holy is to be set apart, to be separate. It's to be separate for God, distinctive in the way that you live.

Not everyone in Corinth had known the blessing of Christ's grace, but those who did now come under His Lordship.

That means that Christ owns His people. In verse 9, look at verse 9, when someone is 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 Him. And so we are called to live accordingly. We are connected to Christ. And so, we belong to Him, and there is a responsibility that comes with that.

This is the basis for all of the rebukes that Paul will give in the letter. He says, stop behaving like that. Why should they stop behaving like the way... When he rebukes them, why should they stop

behaving the way they are?

[22 : 07] Because you belong to Christ. When he confronts the men who are sleeping with temple prostitutes, in chapter 6, Paul dial's this up further. He says, you're united to Christ.

Stop it. You're united to Christ. Don't unite Him with a prostitute. There is a special bond, the mystical union between Christ and His people. Christ is the head.

The bride of Christ is His body. The church is His body. And so we don't just take the name Christian with us wherever we go. There is a sense in which we take Him with us too. And He is in charge.

We belong to Him. It is really important to see that Paul doesn't rail at the culture. He is not cross with Corinth for being Corinthian.

He rebukes the church that says it's Christian when it's behaving like it's Corinthian. So, we need to see that all of that grace that I sought to dial up at the beginning, that Paul seems to front load this letter with, all of that grace tumbles out into this realization.

[23 : 19] If you have Christ's blessing, He has claim on your life, and we are responsible to live by His rules. That is vital that we get it this way around.

Paul will speak to this church, and very harshly in places, but in order to hear those rebukes, they first need to hear these assurances. This is true for all of us, isn't it?

One author says this, we should always stand ready to receive the apostolic rebukes, but we will only do that to the extent that we have heard the apostolic assurances. God's Word always delivers grace before correction.

And Paul is saying, you've had all the grace. You belong to Jesus. So stop living like that's not true. And so he says the same to us. If you're naming Christ, but choosing the culture when the pressure comes, you call yourself a Christian, but you're persisting in some unrepentant sin, stop it.

[24 : 34] Why? Because you've been blessed by Christ, and you belong to Him. You have a new status. You have a new identity. And that brings with it responsibility.

But it is a responsibility that liberates and brings joy. It's like when a child is adopted. They're taken out of one usually awful situation, and they're brought into a new family.

They receive love and blessing and gifts and more kindness than was ever possible before they were adopted. And they take the new family name.

And they are expected to abide by the new family rules. They say, no, don't do that. Being a hunter means that we do things this way.

Of course, often when adopted children misbehave, it's because their past has done something to them such that their bad behavior is a means of protection. Stealing their new siblings' food, it used to be that they didn't know when their next meal was coming.

[25 : 42] So what does their father now say? He leans forward and he says, don't do that. Why? Because you've no need. There's no reason to live that way.

Not only does that bad behavior not belong here, but it doesn't need to belong here because you have now got a different identity.

In this place, around this table, you are loved and protected. And we will always provide for you. You don't need to steal your siblings' food. I think Paul is talking to the Corinthians in the same way. And it's vital that we see this. If you have been blessed by Christ, and you have, if you've put your faith in Him, you have no good reason to sin. There's nothing to be gained by choosing the world's ways over Christ.

He has blessed you beyond measure. You're in fellowship with the living God. God who gives you grace and mercy and grace and mercy in abundance.

[26 : 49] God who will faithfully steer you through the twists and turns of this life to get you safely to glory. You're secure in the hands of the living God.

To choose the alternative, to choose to live like that were not true, is so out of step with your profession of Christ and your status as a saint, but it's also just silly.

You're a Christian. You have been blessed by Christ and you belong to Him. So live in a way that is consistent with that. Put off your sin. Put on obedience because it fits with who you are.

Can I say finally, this evening, if you're not a Christian, I want to say that it is vital that you understand this order as well. Grace comes before instruction.

Jesus does not ask you to get your life cleaned up in order for Him to accept you. He says, come to me. Come to me in faith. Receive the free gift, the grace of salvation.

[28 : 01] Let me take your guilt and give you a cleansed conscience. Let me take your shame and give you new life. If you're not a Christian this evening, that is the invitation that the Christian faith holds out to you.

This is the Christ who calls you and if you hear Him and you come, He welcomes you. And that is why, in the end, grace comes before the correction.

The blessing comes before the responsibility. That is why, in the end, when the church and the culture collide, we go with Christ. There is absolutely nothing to be gained by going the other way.

So, in these days, let me encourage you, when the church and the culture collide, choose Christ.

The cost in the present is always worth it in the long run.

Let's pray together.