

For Paul, the word “*called*” was a dynamic word because Paul knows that we are invited into the Christian life by God and not by some human initiative. For the next few weeks we’re going to focus on the word “*called*” in 1 Corinthians. Paul often told the story of when God *called* him to be an apostle. It’s recorded 3 times in Acts—chp. 9, 22 & 26. He also remembers when God called many people in Corinth to salvation, not just as individual Christians but as the “*church of God in Corinth*” (v. 2). For as Israel was the congregation of God in Old Testament times, so the church was God’s congregation in New Testament times. Paul wanted the members of this small congregation in Corinth to be reminded that they were part of the larger purpose of God for all humankind. Thus, through Paul’s ordinary written greeting, he reminds them of the relationship they have to each other and to God in such a way that it will be easier for them to hear the message he is sending to them.

We should first remember that in all matters of communication, relationships are very important. When I was finishing college, I served as the youth director at Harris Street UMC in Harrisburg PA. The pastor of that church, Reverend Carl Peterson, was my supervisor. Jayne and I have exchanged Christmas cards with the Petersons for well over 40 years. This year I wrote Carl a note that I included with our Christmas card and he immediately wrote back to share how much my message meant to him. I wrote to him about how he and the people of Harris Street Church played a very important role in my recognizing and then answering God’s call to ministry.

Other ministers have told me that I’d better make changes when I first begin a pastorate because after I’ve been there awhile people will be less likely to follow my leadership. But I don’t agree with that idea at all. It seems to imply that the more a pastor and a congregation get to know one another the less they can accomplish. The opposite is true in my experience. By sharing everyday experiences of life and working together through both good and bad times, relationships are built and a larger potential for ministry is created.

Paul was extremely thankful for WHAT GOD GIVES. It was Paul's habit to encourage and praise those with whom he worked and he made no exception in this letter. Even though he might have written the letter primarily to correct the Corinthians, he begins with a section of praise. Some people have questioned Paul's sincerity in this section, knowing the kinds of problems he would be dealing with later in the body of the letter. But when we read the verses more carefully, we see **Paul's focus is on what God has done in their lives.** These brief words about what God was calling them to become came as a source of encouragement as they dealt with the heavy burden of their shortcomings. God loves them and God will be with them. **Considering God's love and concern can always give us a better context from which to deal with our failures.** So, Paul made several statements of thanksgiving for what God had done, beginning in verse 4 with, *"I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus."* Listen church: You are the object of God's grace! God couldn't love you any more than he has already shown.

"Grace" of course is the biblical word for God's unmerited favor. So often in our sinful pride we try to "earn" God's favor, but that is impossible. Behind our effort to try to "impress" God is the feeling that God will not love us the way we are. And we fall prey to that feeling because we live in a world of people who make us try to earn their love by conforming to their expectations for us. Since we tend to go through life auditioning for the love of others, it seems only natural that we would have to do the same thing with God. But the greatest discovery in life is that nothing in our minds or hearts or actions is hidden from God, and he loves us still.

Then Paul writes, *"For in him you have been enriched in every way..."* (v. 5). By saying this he was following a biblical tradition of speaking of the divine/human relationship in terms of wealth or riches. So, after stating **what God gives** his people, Paul communicates that Christ has brought his church spiritual riches. In Luke's gospel Jesus spoke critically of a farmer who amassed a fortune but was not *"rich toward God"* (12:21). The themes of spiritual bankruptcy and spiritual wealth are prominent in the Bible, and for

good reason. Those to whom Paul wrote this letter lived in a society that produced great material wealth, much like our society, but created spiritually bankrupt people. In a society that thinks of little more than making money and having fun there's a constant deterioration in the quality of life. The worth of self and of people diminishes and the quality of relationships deteriorates. Soon the distinctions between right and wrong fade and values become distorted. Social pressure toward evil emerges. This was the mood and pattern of life in first century Corinth, but it's also a fairly apt description of many places today.

Paul's claim is that in a world of spiritual poverty Christ has **enriched the lives** of those to whom he is writing. Paul is pointing to some past action in their lives perhaps referring to their conversions and to whatever growth they subsequently experienced. My first inclination upon reading this is to think that it may have been a tongue-in-cheek statement since Paul will soon be writing about their lack of unity. But Paul was not making a comparison between **what they were and what they ought to be**. Rather, he was thinking of the kind of people they were and the kinds of lives they lived before Christ came into their lives. Measured against their pagan neighbors or even against their former selves it was perfectly clear that Christ had **enriched their lives** in their own experience. **Any life that grasps the truth of God is rich.**

Dr. Ray Collins lived a full life, having practiced medicine in Houston for over sixty years. Collins brought up his family in the church so when at age ninety-four he passed on his family didn't have so much a sense of **grief** at his death as a sense of **gratitude** for his life. Dr. Kenneth Chafin, Collins' pastor in Houston wrote, "After the funeral at the church I rode in the procession to the cemetery for the interment. The Collins family plot was in the same cemetery that the late Howard Hughes is buried and as the procession passed the Hughes grave I thought about the difference between his life and Dr. Collins' life. Howard Hughes was known as the richest man in the world, but he died alone without support of family or friends and is remembered mainly by the courtroom battles for his money. **Dr. Collins was a man whose life God enriched; and it was a kind of wealth that lasts forever.**

God has given each one of us great potential. Later on, Paul devotes three whole chapters to the understanding of spiritual gifts and their use in the church, but here in this “What God Gives” section he thanks God that they “*do not lack any spiritual gift*” (v. 7). The Apostle is trying to encourage them with the realization 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 also have received special gifts. **One of the great insights of Scripture that we need to claim is that God has already given us the gifts that we need to do his will.**

Pastor Kenneth Chafin once spoke at a church in Richmond, Virginia and he expressed appreciation for the good the church was doing. He then asked, “Has God given any of you a special dream for the future of your church? Is there something you would like to see the church do in the name of Christ that it has never done before?” More than a dozen people in the group responded with a resounding YES. They wanted their church to minister creatively to the needs of people in their neighborhood—to reach out in love to them as persons for whom Christ died. The discussion that night went on and on with first one and then another making suggestions as to how they could fulfill their mission. Pastor Chafin was impressed with the thought that these very people already possessed the gifts and abilities they needed to fulfill their dreams. All they needed was the assurance that they could and that God would lead and guide them all the way. Huge, untapped resources, whether in Corinth or in the church of the twenty first century, are in the gifts God has given to his people!

God has given us a basis for hope. In his greeting Paul reminds his friends of the ultimate hope they have in Jesus Christ. It seems a bit strange to find a reference to the second coming in his opening words, **but what Paul is trying to do is to set the problems they face in the context of eternity.** He wants them to be, as he says in verse 8, “*blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*” and gives as the basis of hope not their “good works” but the fact that “*God is faithful*” (v. 9). It’s easy to get so bogged down in today’s failures that

we lose sight of the ultimate triumph in Christ. Verse 9 brackets this passage with another reminder of our *calling*. He insists that God “*has called you/us into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.*” Our faithful God isn’t just calling us to be the holy people God says we are. God also calls us to a relationship with God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul may not explicitly connect our *calling* as God’s holy people with our *fellowship* in Jesus Christ, but those who seek a close relationship with Jesus through prayer and study of Scripture, as well as in fellowship with Jesus’ other followers, receive strength from the Holy Spirit to be holy. Both the Corinthians and God’s church today demonstrate our lives aren’t always as holy as God makes us to be. Few people would label the Christians of Corinth as “strong” or “holy.” After all, they could hardly stay out of their neighbors’ bedrooms or keep from dragging their fellow Christians into court. Jesus’ present-day friends struggle to love our neighbors as ourselves, to say nothing of loving God more than anything.

Were it up to us alone, we wouldn’t stay strong and holy until the end. If it were up to us alone, Jesus’ closest friends would be in eternal danger. If we are to remain faithful, it will be up to our faithful God to keep us faithful, **to rely completely on the grace God has given.** One day I asked my aunt why she always read the last chapter of a book first. Without a moment’s hesitation she said, “If I don’t like the way a book ends, I don’t see any sense wasting my time reading it.” Maybe we Christians need to take a page out of my aunt’s book, because we already know how things are going to turn out. **I believe Paul wanted to assure his Corinthian friends that their future was as secure as the promises of God.** There will come a day when **life** overcomes death, when **love** overcomes hate, when **good** overcomes evil, and **the Kingdom of God** triumphs over the kingdoms of this world. It is the assurance of this promised future that allows us to live with confidence in the present.

As *The Message Bible* paraphrases verse 9, “***God will never give up on you. Never forget that.***” Never forget that...never. Amen.