

# THE GRACE OF GOD

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**1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9**  
**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**  
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**JANUARY 15, 2017/2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY**

Over the next six Sundays as we approach Lent we're going to be focusing on the weekly readings from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians cuts right to the heart of what it means for the church to have its character, behaviour, attitudes, and worldview reshaped by the upside-down kingdom inaugurated by Jesus Christ. This is just as important and relevant and necessary in the twenty first century as it was in the first.

Today we begin at the beginning: the first nine verses of the letter.

Beginnings are important.

If a movie or TV show takes a while to get going, we'll turn it off.

If a book doesn't grab us in the first forty pages, chances are we won't finish it (unless you bought it... in which case, if you're anything like me, you will try to stubbornly slog through it as a somber exercise of duty).

Beginnings are becoming even more important in a context where our attention spans are getting shorter and shorter due to the Internet and all of its nasty effects on our ability to concentrate.

Experts tell me that as a blogger I have around fifty to seventy-five words to grab people's attention or else they'll click on to something else. If you're don't hook them in

the opening paragraph—or even the *title*—you won't get them. So, I'm told. There are just too many options out there, all clamouring for our increasingly fleeting attention.

Same goes for a sermon. If pastors don't begin with a joke or a clever anecdote or some form of visual stimulation via video or PowerPoint, people will begin nodding off in the pews (in other churches, of course!). So the experts say...

Beginnings are important. They set the tone.

Take this letter from a son to his father that made the rounds in the world of social media a while back:

Dear Dad,

It is with great regret and sorrow that I'm writing you. I had to elope with my new girlfriend, because I wanted to avoid a scene with Mom and you. I've been finding real passion with Stacy, and she is so nice. However, I knew you would not approve of her because of her piercings, tattoos, and tight motorcycle clothes. Also, she is so much older than me.

But it's not only the passion, Dad. She's pregnant. Stacy said that we will be very happy. She owns a trailer in the woods and has a stack of firewood for the whole winter. We share a dream of having many more children.

Stacy has opened my eyes to the fact that marijuana doesn't really hurt anyone. We'll be growing it for ourselves and trading it with other people in the commune for all the cocaine and ecstasy we want.

Don't worry, Dad. I'm 15, and I know how to take care of myself. Someday, I'm sure we'll be back to visit, so you can get to know your many grandchildren.

Love,  
Joshua

P.S. Dad, none of the above is true. I'm over at Jason's house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than the report card that's on the kitchen table. Call when it's safe to come home!

Beginnings are important. ☺

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So how does Paul begin his letter to the Corinthians?

The Corinthian church was founded only a few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, in a Greek port city bustling with economic activity and diversity of all kinds.

Like all of the churches Paul planted, and all of the churches the world has seen ever since, the church in Corinth was not perfect. Far from it.

A quick tour through both of Paul's letters to this church shows a laundry list of problems:

- Abuse and misunderstanding of spiritual gifts (failure to love—this is the context of the famous “love passage” in chapter 13)
- Incest and various other forms of sexual immorality
- Abuse and misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper
- Squabbles and factionalism over leadership
- Immaturity, jealousy, quarreling
- Scrambling to assert “rights” instead of serving and deferring to one another
- Lawsuits between believers
- Theological confusion about what following Jesus means for Jewish and pagan ritual observances
- Rejection of Paul's authority and the embrace of false prophets
- Greed and other forms of social injustice

So, given these realities, how does Paul begin this letter to the church in Corinth?

Does he launch into a scathing critique of their many sins? Does he wag his finger at them and tell them that he really expected quite a bit more of them? Does he become a channel for expressing God's displeasure at their unwillingness to be what they had been called to be?

He *will* do each of these things. But that's not how he starts.

He starts with two words: Grace and peace. *To you, from God.*

Then he moves on to three more important words: I give thanks. Because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,

He tells the Corinthians that they have been enriched in Christ, in speech and knowledge of every kind.

He says the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among them.

He says they are “not lacking in any spiritual gift as they wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

He reminds them that God will strengthen them to the end, so that they may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Blameless!* Despite all of the problems and sins Paul will go on to uncover.

He concludes with three more important words. *God is faithful.* Even when they are not, God is faithful and God will accomplish his purposes in them.

So what’s going on here? Is Paul just trying to soften them up? Is he paying the Corinthians a few introductory compliments before he gets on to the more important business of hammering them with all of their shortcomings?

This might be *part* of what’s going on. It is undoubtedly a good rhetorical strategy to deliver the good news before the bad news.

When I was a graduate student, one of my professors had an interesting exam format. We were given three hours to respond to three problematic statements that we might later encounter in the church.

For example, “As Christians, we don’t need to take care of the earth because God’s just going to trash it and start over again some day.”

We would be required to use all the course material we had covered in our responses.

But there was one catch. We couldn’t criticize the statement until we had *first* affirmed what could be affirmed. Even if we spent the vast majority of our response critiquing, we had to *start* by saying something nice.

I have found this valuable in all of life. It's really important to establish common ground, to have conversations anchored in good will and mutuality.

Paul might be doing something like this in the first nine verses of 1 Corinthians. But he's doing something much bigger and more important than this, too.

He is expressing one of the deepest and most hopeful truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, as Christians, our hope is based in what God has done for us, not in what we can achieve for ourselves.

The church is called, sustained, enlivened, and is being led into the future by the faithfulness of God, not by our own faithfulness.

God is a more reliable source than us when it comes to telling us the truth about who we are.

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These truths are foundational when it comes to all of the Christian life.

Grace precedes striving.

God's initiative precedes our own (we love because he *first* loved us: 1 John 4:19)

The good news that we are loved and accepted and gifted by the Spirit of God precedes the bad news that some renovation work will be necessary in our hearts and minds if we are to reflect the goodness, beauty, and love of God to those around us

We are invited into a life of holiness. We are *called*—that word appears three times in our text this morning—to be conformed to the image of Christ.

But only after we are told the deep and hopeful truth about who we are apart from what we have done, apart from what we can do, apart from what we will do or fail to do.

We are loved. We are accepted. We are offered mercy and forgiveness. If we have accepted the free gift of Christ, we have been “enriched in every way” and are “not lacking in any spiritual gift.”

It's not always easy to believe this about the church.

Our church might not have some of the sensationalistic problems that plagued the Corinthians. But, like every church, ours is populated by sinners.

No church is immune from the dispositions Paul described.

We may not be suing each other and getting drunk at communion, but we don't have to look very far to see that our provincial and national churches are struggling to deal with division rooted in theological squabbling. It has perhaps never been easier to walk away from those who disagree with us. And so we do.

On Wednesday night, our church is hosting an ecumenical service here to recognize the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I'm looking forward to it. It's a wonderful opportunity to worship with Catholics and Anglicans and Baptists and Presbyterians and Lutherans and to celebrate our unity in Christ (and I hope many of you come out!).

But we still don't take communion together. There is much that has been done to repair historical divisions, but much work remains.

What's true of the church is also true of us as individual Christians. It's not always easy to believe what God declares to be true about us, is it?

Even if we know all the right theological answers about our identity in Christ: forgiven, filled with the Spirit, empowered, gifted with power, love, and self-discipline and not timidity, as it says in 2 Timothy 1:7. Agents of reconciliation. Recipients of what Paul calls the "indescribable gift" of grace (2 Cor. 9:15).

All of these things we believe to be true about us because of what God has done. But sometimes what is true bears little resemblance to our lived experience.

Sometimes we feel weak, undisciplined, powerless, depressed... Sometimes we stubbornly refuse to forgive or to accept that we are loved. Sometimes we don't want to love our neighbour as ourselves. Sometimes we feel miles from God. Sometimes we live in prisons of shame and self-loathing.

Sometimes we give the strong impression that whatever we *say* we believe about how God has done all that is necessary for salvation, we really believe that the life of faith is about earning our way back to God.

Perhaps we need to hear the two words Paul began with: Grace and peace. *To you, from God.*

Perhaps we need to hear the three words he ends with: *God is faithful.*

Perhaps we need to be reminded that all human effort to become what we were made to become can only proceed from the first word of the Gospel, which is,

*For God so loved... that he gave...*

If we start with the smaller truths of our own experience, I think we will struggle our whole lives to live into the hope of the gospel.

But if we start with the expansive truth of God's gracious gift of life and hope that precedes our first thought of him, then all our striving can be the joy-filled response to a generous gift, and a grateful acceptance of a summons to become what we were created to be.

I want to close with a well-known quote from the late Brennan Manning's most celebrated book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*:

When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.

To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. In admitting my shadow side I learn who I am and what God's grace means. As Thomas Merton put it, "A saint is not someone who is good but who experiences the goodness of God."

The gospel of grace... obliterates the two-class citizenship theory operative in many [North] American churches. For grace proclaims the awesome truth that all

is gift. All that is good is ours not by right but by the sheer bounty of a gracious God. While there is much we may have earned—our degree and our salary, our home and garden, a Miller Lite and a good night’s sleep—all this is possible only because we have been given so much: life itself, eyes to see and hands to touch, a mind to shape ideas, and a heart to beat with love. We have been given God in our souls and Christ in our flesh. We have the power to believe where others deny, to hope where others despair, to love where others hurt. This and so much more is sheer gift; it is not reward for our faithfulness, our generous disposition, or our heroic life of prayer. Even our fidelity is a gift, “If we but turn to God,” said St. Augustine, “that itself is a gift of God.” My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it.”

The grace of God, the generosity of God, the faithfulness of God—these are the foundational realities that Paul wanted the church in Corinth to hear. Before they heard anything else.

And these are the realities that you and I—the church—need to continue hearing today.

God is faithful. He will strengthen us to the end, so that we might be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

