
Thanksgiving for Believers

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

Introduction

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And so, a great many people were added to the Lord. (Acts 11:19-24 ESV)

What I would love to see happen because of this message tonight is for everybody here to be able to say with Barnabas: "I saw the grace of God and I am glad." As we observe from Acts 11:19ff when people who are "full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" see grace changing others their hearts become glad. And as a result, they constantly give thanks to God for this life-changing, soul-satisfying, Christ-glorifying grace in the lives of other people.

Tonight's message, *Thanksgiving for Believers*, is a part of a series on NT Praying; the Prayers of the Apostles. Over the next five months or so your elders, Lord permitting, will take us through most of the prayers of the Apostles. Our desire is to expound on them so that our prayer life will be both shaped and stimulated along the trajectory of God's purposes. We do not merely want to inform. We want to inspire all of us to pray.

Pastor Russ started us off in this series by making clear Jesus' instructions over prayer seen in Matthew 6. By avoiding the problems of self-centered praying and staying within the pattern of God-centered praying Russ informed and inspired us to pray as God would have us pray. Tonight I want to continue in this objective by turning our attention to the Apostle Paul and 1 Corinthians 1:4-9. In this passage we will hear Paul telling people why he thanks God so much. Paul is not praying in this passage. He is talking to the church in Corinth about the reasons for his regular habit to thank the Lord for his converts. We will notice as we read this section that in his thanksgiving Paul sets out to accomplish two things.

1. He genuinely and gladly gives thanks to God for what God has done and will do in the lives of the Corinthians.
2. He redirects the Corinthians' focus off of God's gifts and onto the Giver of those gifts; namely God Himself.

To begin, let's pick up Paul's thought in 1 Corinthians one starting with v.4 (read vv.4-9).

As Gifted by God

Vv.4-7

We see in this paragraph reasons for Paul giving thanks to God for believers. There are two basic reasons. The first one is observed in vv.4-7. It is Paul's tendency to give thanks to God for believers seeing that they are gifted by God.

In verse four Paul gives the reason for his glad-hearted habit of expressing thanksgiving to God. "...because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus". He then goes on in vv.5-7 to elaborate on this grace.

Grace / Gift

Grace taught in the Bible can mean the gracious outpouring of God's mercy toward the undeserving. For example in Ephesians we hear about this matchless grace as "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast" (2:7-9). Undoubtedly Paul has this idea as the backdrop of all his teaching on grace. But here in vv.4-7 it appears that grace has a more visible, tangible expression. We notice in verse five that Paul spells out specifically the grace of God for which he is giving thanks. They have been enriched in every way. Gifted by God these believers were made rich by the grace of God. And so grace as used here refers to giftedness. And this unmerited, God-given giftedness in the Corinthians' lives caused Paul to have a glad-hearted habit of expressing thanksgiving to God.

Spirit-given Speech and Knowledge

As we read on we see that this idea of grace as a spiritual gift is further narrowed down to two spiritual gifts. The specific graces are said to be "all speech" ("logos") and "all knowledge" ("gnosis"). By using chapters 12-14 to shape our understanding of these terms likely he meant something like "Spirit-given speech" pointing us to the many gifts of utterance noted in chapters 12-14. And the spiritual gift of "all knowledge" may point to the special knowledge given to some as seen in 12:8; 13:2; and 14:6. We will point out later why Paul may have focused in on these two gifts. But for now we see that Paul's tendency to thank God for them was in part due to the Corinthians' spiritual giftedness. Paul thanks God always for them because of the grace of God seen in their particular giftedness.

As Guaranteed by God

Vv.8-9

Yet this is only part of the reason for Paul's glad-heartedness over them. As we read on in this paragraph we come to the second reason for his thanksgiving. Found vv.8-9 we notice that Paul regularly gave thanks to God for believers seeing that they were guaranteed by God.

Standing: Guiltless for the day of Christ

With verse 8, Paul finally brings to a conclusion the long sentence that began in verse 4. He does so by talking on the Last Day and the coming of Jesus Christ. Paul's thanksgiving over them is fueled by his confidence in God over what He will do for them at the End. Paul's gladness in God expressed in thanksgiving to Him over the Corinthians was founded upon God's future grace in their lives. They will stand guiltless in the day of Christ. This is a guarantee by God. Paul looks upon the believers in Corinth and sees the future reality for them. Their *STANDING* as a guarantee by God was a factor in Paul's habit of giving thanks to God for them.

Source: God is faithful

One of the striking features of this paragraph is seen in Paul's utter confidence over this church. As one reads First Corinthians one notices that they are anything but standing blameless. This letter is filled with problems; problems between each other and problems between the founder of the church (Paul) and the church. One of the main reasons for writing this letter was to correct the primary cause of the problems. And Paul does just that. But for now, Paul is relishing in God over what He said He will do. Paul, in other words, has free-flowing gratitude for the church; not because they were faithful but because God is faithful. The *SOURCE* of the guarantee that they will stand in the Day of Christ guiltless is none other than the Faithfulness of God as noticed in verse 9. This paragraph makes clear why Paul thanks God so much. His ongoing inclination to bless God for God's people was founded upon what God has done and what God will do in the lives of His people.

We noticed Paul accomplishing the first of two things he set out to do. He made known to God's people that he genuinely and gladly gives thanks to God for his past grace (i.e. saving, loving, empowering and gifting them) and his future grace (i.e. sustaining them to the end guiltless in the day of Christ) in the lives of His chosen people. And when Paul pondered that he was glad and told God so repeatedly.

Principle #1

The first principle I see in this paragraph and one I desire to press upon our hearts is this.

- *Our ability to regularly thank God comes from our ability to regularly see His grace.*

Paul looked for God and His grace in the local church. He gladly thanked God for His people even when they were causing him grief. The giving thanks to God was based not on how well the relationship was going (Paul's relationships were strained badly). The giving of thanks to God regularly was based not on what Paul was receiving personally from the Lord. The giving of thanks to God regularly was based on grace in other people's lives; the past grace of giftedness and the future grace of guaranteed. Paul was happy. And he found his source of happiness in what God had done in the lives of His people and what He will do in the lives of His people (even when His people have gone sour for a season). If we are to be a people of thanksgiving, Paul's focus needs to be our

focus. He looked for grace in the local church. He saw grace in the local church. He then ran to God in regular expressions of thanksgiving for the local church.

Are we routinely thankful people? Do we do what we notice Paul doing? Do we look for grace in the lives of other people? Can we see grace in the lives of these people even when relationships may be strained? Do we have this type of heart; a large, forgiving, desiring, caring, other-centered heart? Does our prayer life reflect a grace-empowered habit of thanking God?

If not, then let's continue on to Principle #2.

One would merely need to read cover to cover 1Corinthians to see a basic problem in their lives. They were enriched by God with spiritual gifts. They had some of the top teachers and preachers of the first century Christian church. They were heavily favored by the generosity of the sovereign God. And how do they sound? Do they sound like Paul in this paragraph? Listen, for example, to 4:7. *For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?* The church had lost its focus. They were losing their respect and allegiance to God's apostle and his gospel. They were becoming enamored by worldly wisdom. They took their eyes off of the Giver of gifts and placed them upon the gifts of the Giver. Boasting, arrogance, strife and demanding spirit are some characteristics of those who do this.

Paul not only wanted to accomplish telling them of his thankful heart he also wanted to pen this paragraph down to redirect the Corinthians' focus off of God's gifts and onto the Giver of those gifts; namely God seen most clearly in our Lord Jesus Christ. They were not regularly thanking God because their affections were upon God's goodies and not God's glories.

Principle #2

The second principle I see in this paragraph and one I desire to press upon our hearts is this.

- *When regular thanksgiving to God decreases redirecting focus upon God must increase.*

When good things become the main things our focus becomes fuzzy. When we take our eyes off of the Lord Jesus Christ and fix the gaze of our hearts on His gifts idolatry happens. This was a main concern for Paul with the Corinthians. And this is a main concern in American Christianity.

In an article in World Magazine (Jan.-Feb. of 02) John Piper posed the question, [Are we] Glad about glory? The first sentence sets the reader up for a striking article. He says, "*One of the most stunning shifts in American Christianity is the shift away from God as the all-satisfying gift of God's love*". Paul looked for the remarkable gift of God's love in a congregation that was graced and guaranteed. He saw the past and future grace of God. And saw the faithfulness and power and kindness and love of God. He ultimately saw God in

Christ in God's people. And that made him glad expressing in the regular praying of thanksgiving.

Conclusion To conclude this message allow me to ask you some probing questions in order to apply God's word to our particulars.

- Are you habitually a thankful person? When people look at you, do they conclude that you are characteristically grateful? What would your children or spouse say about you regarding this question?
 - ◆ When money is tight? When relationships are strained? When the body is aching? (all these circumstances Paul faced)
- Are you regularly praying? And is your prayer life characterized by thankfulness to God for others? Is expressing gratitude to God interrupted when things are not going well? When people hear your prayer requests or hear you pray do they hear more about you and your circumstances or do they hear much of God and His faithfulness?
- Where do you tend to look for grace and gladness? Is it at God's gifts (i.e. spiritual giftedness and eternal security)? Are you inclined to look for these gifts only as they relate to you (Notice how much time we think upon what type of gift(s) we have and how eternal security relates to self)? Can you see God's grace in other people? Do you look in that direction to see and savor God through His gifts?
- Are hindrances to giving thanks for believers common in your life? Do you hear yourself thinking words like:
 - ◆ She always gets the best. I wish I had his gift. If I only had that position... Nothing ever goes right for me. God seems to favor her more than me. I want what she has. OR
 - ◆ There is nothing of grace I can see in him because he causes me grief. My spouse has a sour spirit. Why would I look in the direction of my spouse to see grace (cf. Phil.4:8-9)? I don't require the local church to see grace. I have all I need. My gifts and my security make me happy.

Paul in 1Cor.1:4-9 aimed to accomplish two things. He genuinely and gladly wanted God's people to know that he was thankful often to God for what God has done and will do in their lives.

And secondly, he wanted to redirect God's people's focus off of God's gifts and onto the Giver of those gifts; namely God seen in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What is our frame of mind and focus of heart? Is it Paul-like? A focus that

- centers on God
- sees graciousness landing upon the undeserving.
- marveling at the beauty and love of God's grace and how it changes people
- honestly and freely giving thanks to God for people who may cause us grief.

Or is our frame of mind and focus of heart Corinthian-like?

- Centering on self and how God has or has not gifted me.
- dazzled by gifts
- looking for grace only in my own life
- using my gifts to serve me and make much of me
- grumbling and complaining when life is hard
- with a prayer life that says little about God and much about me

Beloved, lift up your eyes and then look out to notice God amid His people. Look for grace in other people as a means of gladdening your heart. Then, your prayer life will be one of regular thanksgiving to God for believers.

Amen.