

Sermon for November 22, 2012 - Thanksgiving

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Theme: Grateful for God's gift of grace.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way--in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- ⁶ because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Has this ever happened to you? You buy a really nice, expensive gift for a toddler. You expect that he is going to absolutely love it. But when the day comes for him to open the gift, he finds more pleasure playing with the bubble wrap, the box and even the torn wrapping paper than with the gift you just gave him.

Did you know that, when it comes to God's gifts, we often act like toddlers - more interested in the bubble wrap and box, than the gift itself? Think about how engrossed we are with this world and the things of this world. We are happy and thankful for all the material blessings we have - house and home, family and friends, good food, football, hunting, television, computers, and smart phones etc. . . We spend a lot - most of our time actually - playing with all these physical blessings.

Now is it wrong to enjoy and be thankful for all these wonderful gifts? Certainly not. They are all graciously given to us out of love from our Heavenly Father. The problem is that we often find ourselves engrossed with them, when they are really nothing more than the bubble wrap and boxes that preserve His greater, more costly gifts for us. And what are these greater gifts? Our salvation, faith, the Holy Spirit, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, the fellowship of the saints and all the other spiritual gifts meant to preserve our faith.

On this Thanksgiving Day, let us then stop focusing on the bubble wrap, and thank God for His greater gifts, under the theme: "**Grateful for God's gift of grace.**"

Our sermon text for this morning is from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The congregation in Corinth had a problem: they too were so focused on the bubble wrap and boxes that God surrounds his greater gifts with, that they were starting to neglect the greater gifts themselves. What I mean is this: when God brought the members of the Corinthian congregation to faith, he poured out upon them a lot other gifts like good leaders, many talents, a heart that is not too quick to judge, speaking in tongues, prophecy, big potluck dinners called "agape feasts" etc. . . Unfortunately the Corinthians became so engrossed with these others gifts that they forgot the purpose they served. These gifts became more important to them than the Gospel.

St. Paul heard of the situation, and starts off his letter by reminding them of the primary gift of grace God so lovingly gave them. He writes: *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Did you catch the name Paul repeats 4 times in these first 3 verses? It is Christ. Paul was a servant of Christ Jesus. The congregation in Corinth was sanctified in Christ Jesus - who is both their LORD and the LORD of everyone who calls on his name. 5 more times in the next 6 verses Paul is going to mention Christ Jesus. The point? He and his kingdom is what we should be focusing our attention on, because He himself is God's greatest gift - the one which all other gifts are meant to serve.

The Corinthian believers were recipients of wonderful underserved love from God. He saved them. How? First of all by sending Jesus to live, die and rise again in order to pay for all the sins of all people of all time. Then God showed his grace to the Corinthians by bringing them to faith in this message of salvation. He set them apart from the world for Himself - that they might be considered His holy people. He united them with all believers throughout the world. They were set apart by God to enjoy His everlasting peace.

What is true regarding the Corinthian congregation is also true for us: *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"* (1 John 3:1) While we were still sinners and considered God our enemy, God chose to love us. He saved us by sending His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He sent out His Holy Spirit through the preaching of His Gospel to find us, convert us, and bring us to faith in him. Through baptism he washed us clean from all sin and sealed us as his own children by giving us His Spirit. The Holy Spirit continues to purify our hearts through his Word and will keep us safe until the day Jesus comes to take us home to be with Him forever.

This is the grace God has given us, and eternity is too short a time to thank and praise him for it. Sadly, like the Corinthians, we sometimes take this greatest gift for granted - focusing our attention on the bubble wrap of material things instead of salvation. May the Lord forgive us for this, and grant us a right spirit that finds joy in His salvation.

But the gift of salvation and peace is not the only thing God has given us. He also gives us other gifts meant to preserve and proclaim our fellowship with Him. St. Paul tells the Corinthians: *"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus."* After salvation, the next gift Paul is thankful for are the Corinthians themselves. He finds joy in the fellowship of the saints.

Brothers and sisters in Christ - don't only find joy in your blood relatives this thanksgiving, find joy in, and thank God for every member of Immanuel – even the ones that annoy you! What unites you to each other in this congregation is a stronger bond than the blood that unites you with your immediate family. We are God's family!

Sadly, like the Corinthian congregation, we don't always feel or act this way towards each other. Many times we gripe and complain, we gossip or hold grudges, we avoid and mistrust. We don't put the best construction on the actions of our brothers and we allow ourselves to be easily offended.

Realize this, brothers and sister in Christ: when you are tempted to feel or act this way, you are – in fact - being led by the devil who is trying to sow the seeds of discord and enmity in order to steal you away from the divine family into which God adopted you. Repent, and start looking at your fellow brothers with the eyes of Christ - seeing each member here as a precious soul whom God has graciously saved through His Son's sacrifice. Thank God for each other

Paul writes: *"I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way--in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- ⁶ because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed."*

God gave the Corinthians His Word and all the gifts necessary to share His Word. And do you know what? God has given us these very same gifts as well! What a blessing it is that we belong to a church that takes every word of God seriously! What a blessing it is that you belong to a church that is ready to teach and study God's Word. What a blessing it is that God has given our family of believers so many varied gifts and experiences so that we can be strengthened and encouraged in the faith - looking forward to the day of our Savior's reappearing.

Sadly, we often are tempted to take these gifts for granted. We are eager to get together for a fun night of fellowship, but not so eager to get together for a Bible class. Don't get me wrong: fun fellowship with each other is great - and a gift of God. But it is bubble wrap compared to the greater gift of fellowship in the Word the LORD wants us to share with each other. A fun night of fellowship refreshes our emotions. Fellowship in the Word refreshes not only our emotions, but also our very souls. This fellowship fosters a bond between us that is not easily broken, and that will only encourage us all the more as we walk through life.

St. Paul writes: ⁸ *He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ⁹ *God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*"

The last gift we want to think about today is God's gift of preserving our faith. God is faithful and will not abandon us to this evil world. Jesus himself promises to be with us to the very end of the age. More than that, He sends us the Holy Spirit to keep us clothed in Christ's righteousness so that we will be free from the guilt of sin on judgment day.

God's presence is a wonderful gift the LORD loves to give us, which He tells us we should always be asking for . . . and yet do we? When is the last time you prayed for a greater gift of God's Spirit? How often do we pray: "Lord keep me steadfast in your Word. Help me grow in knowledge and faith in you. Send your Holy Spirit to help me in this."? Or do we more often pray: "Lord, preserve my life, grant me health, make my finances stable, etc. . ."? Again, there is nothing wrong with praying for such things – they too are gifts from God. The problem is when we focus on these earthly things to the exclusion of His greater gifts.

God's gracious gift of Himself, His salvation, His Word, and His saints (fellow believers) are truly gifts to be thankful today and every day. Realize how great these gifts are! Food, clothing, family and material things - these will all preserve our life on this decaying planet. God's Word, forgiveness, faith, the Holy Spirit and the communion of saints prepare and preserve us for life everlasting. Let us then be grateful for these gifts of grace, and use them all to the glory of God. Amen.