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Corinthians 1:1-19 "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on 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."

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you-so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 1:4)

A study of the Corinthian letters is one of the most relevant a church can make today. It was a church in an urban setting. Wherever there is a port, money, cultural diversity and good weather, you'll find people with problems. The church had divided into factions. There was sexual immorality. There were lawsuits between Christians. There were Christians hooked on alcohol, to the point that they disrupted the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. There were struggles over the charismatic gifts. The Lord's Supper was beginning to be a cliquish event. There were persons with false notions about the resurrection. Then there were practical matters involving the women's issue. And there were some who were denying the resurrection. Paul had to speak to all this.

And there was a somewhat obscure issue to our modern mind about whether or not a Christian could eat meat offered to idols -- obscure that is until one begins to deal with the whole matter of how does a Christian live in a pagan culture. So Paul, writing between A.D. 54 and 56, deals lovingly but firmly with this group of believers, so similar to those of us living in the "fast lane" yet needing God's stabilizing influence.

As I step back and look at 1 Corinthians, and particularly at today's text, I am struck with the reality of the importance of thanksgiving in our lives as believers in Jesus Christ.

Let's concentrate on two kinds of thanks.

First, you and I are privileged to give thanks for the way God has called us into relationship with himself and with each other.

In spite of our weaknesses as individuals and as a church, the fact is that you and I are called people.

Paul was called by the will of God to be an Apostle in Christ Jesus. He was to be an ambassador, a representative of the Lord. He did his job well.

Paul was not the only one called. [First Corinthians 1:2-3](#) reads, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on 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."

You are called to be a saint. I know you have a hard time relating to that privileged responsibility. I know that you don't look forward to polishing your halo, which you are not quite sure, is there. God tells us in the New Testament that all the believers are "saints," holy persons set apart by Jesus Christ for particular functions. This means that you have been devoted to the possession and service of God.

In the first century, it was the word by which to describe a temple or a sacrifice, which has been marked out for God. If a person has been singled out as belonging to God, that person must show himself or herself to be fit in life and character for that service. The root idea is "separation." You are separated from the ordinary run of things or persons in order especially to belong to God. Do you see yourself as special? You are! If you are not living with the reality of this, you, God and the rest of us are the losers. You, every bit as much as the Apostle Paul, are called of God. God makes His claim on your life.

Not only are you called, you are also built for relationship.

I'm convinced that the bottom line message of too many churches is to "add Jesus to your already successful lifestyle, and you have it made!"

Let me build a bit on that. There is a cursed brand of individuals running rampant in what is called the Christian community. It is as if we want to live free from the problems of others and the horrendous needs of our world.

We barely survive in our nuclear family as husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister. If the problems get too tough, the tendency is to split, retreating into the semi-comfort of our own individualistic existence. This is one of the reasons we have so much divorce.

How tempting it is to do the same thing spiritually. We find a church where the preaching is entertaining or where we can get some handles on our own life. But we don't want to be burdened with the concerns of others. We don't want to be asked to be a servant. We have enough problems of our own, much less having to carry the problems of others. We want that one-way ticket to heaven. We hold on tight, so that no one will take it away. We are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. But we don't want to get contaminated with the problems of others. Oh, we don't say it in quite that blatant a way. But we do have our defense mechanisms, don't we?

You and I are built for relationship.

When Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth, he referred to them as being ". . . called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2).

You, as an individual, are called. But you and I are also called to be saints together.

We are in community. We are in relationship. You may have forgotten it, but, for a number of years, every Sunday we sang not only the "Doxology." And we linked that great affirmation of praise to the Triune God with the very simple but profound words written by Bill and Gloria Gaither.

I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God.

I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by His blood.

Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod.

For I'm part of the family, the family of God.

You will notice we say brother and sister around here.

It's because we're a family, and these folks are so near.

When one has heartache, we all share the tears and rejoice in each victory in this family so dear.

Are some of your best friends members in a church? I hope so. If that's not the case, my prayer for you is that it will become your experience. That is why we have these covenant groups, ten to twelve persons meeting weekly, discussing the Scriptures, and reflecting on what I'm preaching on each of these Sundays, sharing their needs, praying together. How often I've said it, and I'll continue to say it until it gets across: "There is no room for 'Lone Ranger' Christianity." Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. You can't go it alone in the Christian faith. We are called to be saints together.

The September 12, 2005, issue of The New Yorker has a profoundly observant article about Saddleback Church and how Rick Warren's congregation grew. It's titled, "The Cellular Church." After describing the phenomenon of Rick Warren's ministry, the success of his book, The Purpose-Driven Life, and the huge mega-church he's built in South Orange County, the author, Malcolm Gladwell, becomes quite philosophical. He notes that vibrant churches hold one thing in common, no matter how small or large they are. They basically are made up of "small groups" of committed people who know each other and are united in a common commitment. He quotes philosopher Dick Westley, who writes:

As I see it, one of the most unfortunate misunderstandings of our time has been to think of small intentional communities as groups "within" the church. When are we going to have the courage to publicly proclaim what everyone with any experience with small groups has known all along: they are not organizations "within" the church; they are the church.

The article goes on to note the church in the United States is becoming increasingly active in producing volunteers who are bringing change to our environment. Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who has studied the phenomenon closely, says:

Small groups are networks. . .They create bonds among people. Expose people to needs, provide opportunities for volunteering, and put people in harm's way of being asked to volunteer. That's not to say that being there for worship is not important. But, even in earlier research, I was finding that if people say all the right things about being a believer but aren't involved in some kind of physical social setting that generates interaction, they are just not as likely to volunteer.

Do you see how the circle broadens? Not only do we have the individual calling of God upon our lives to be saints, not only do we have the privilege of being in intimate relationship here as a local congregation, but we also are linked together with other brothers and sisters throughout Erie County, the State of Pennsylvania and the rest of the United States.

When a crisis hits like Hurricane Katrina, we are able to mobilize ourselves in a few days' time to raise well over \$210,000, and we are able to plug ourselves in as the family of God with sister churches in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, to feed, clothe, rebuild lives devastated.

And our family is even much larger than that as Americans. We are linked together in a universal family of believers everywhere on Planet Earth. That's why I take such joy in being part of different gatherings. At each different event that I attend, brothers and sisters from different churches are gathered together and, through simultaneous translation, heard great addresses, marvelous worship and celebrated the sacrament of the Lord's Supper together.

That is why I get excited about our ministry teams from St. Andrew's who travel to serve brothers and sisters in Christ in Malawi, Egypt, India, the Philippines, Mexico, and the list goes on. I can link arms with my brother in Christ, Elmer

Lavastida, in Cuba, who lives just 90 miles from our country but in a totally different world. He can minister here at St. Andrew's, and I can minister in his church in Santiago de Cuba. We embrace together in Jesus Christ.

And the circle widens even farther.

One of my dear friends is Dr. George Docherty, a rugged Scot who for 26 years was the pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. You may remember him as Peter Marshall's successor, or the pastor of Abraham Lincoln's church located within a stone's throw of the White House. He was the one who encouraged President Eisenhower and members of the United States Congress to include "one nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, which Civil Libertarians fought so viciously this week. The court has declared the Pledge of Allegiance can no longer be recited by California public school children.

Dr. Docherty's eyes began to mist as he shared with me his thoughts of yesteryear. He describes walking through the streets of Glasgow, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Iona and Washington, D.C., seeing the ghosts that walk those streets where he had ministered. He says, "I can't go back and have it the same way it used to be. So many of my loved ones have gone to be with Christ." And then looking at me with all the intensity one can bring in eye contact, counseled in that crisply articulated Scottish brogue, "John, never lead your people to the throne of grace in a pastoral prayer without remembering to thank God for the communion of saints, those who have gone before, with whom we are linked in such meaningful ways."

I say the same to you. Remember, you were built for relationship. Don't go it alone in the Christian faith. Enjoy the family of St. Andrew's. Cultivate a global Christian view that reaches out to brothers and sisters in Christ here in Orange County, throughout the United States and across this Planet Earth, resisting those self-indulgent urges to individualism, separatism, cultivating your own exclusive and comfortable existence. Thank God for your connectedness with brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, who have gone before. They are still alive, even more so than you and I. Why? Because they are in the presence of Jesus Christ with new bodies, healed beings. Right now, they're cheering us on. They fill the stands in the arena. We are the players on the field. We are in this together. Thank God for the family of God. Thank God for all the saints who from their labors rest!

Do you see what Paul has accomplished in these opening words to the church at Corinth? He's reminded them of his own authority as an apostle. He knows he's going to have to deal with some difficult topics. His authority must be established. An apostle is one who has received his commission directly from the Savior, one who has seen the resurrected Lord with his own eyes, and one who has supreme authority. Nine times in these opening nine verses, he names the name of Jesus Christ, establishing his apostolic authority. He has been called by the will of God. He is not a puppet of the wealthy or the powerful or even the masses. He is an ambassador of God with a specific message that must be heard. He's addressing it to a church, not to a building made of bricks and mortar, but to a gathered people, saints who are consecrated, holy, pure, in the eyes of God, although not perfect in their own accomplishment. He refers to the saints at Corinth. He doesn't say the members of my church or Peter's church or the church of Apollos. Too often here in Southern California, we refer to the church as Robert Schuller's church, Chuck Smith's church, Rick Warren's church, Kenton Beshore's church, or even John Huffman's church. How much better it is to refer to the saints of the community of believers in Garden Grove, Costa Mesa, Saddleback, Irvine, and Newport Beach. Paul is establishing our relationship that we have with each other.

And to us, specifically and corporately, he says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:3).

Now Paul, who is about to begin some very strong teaching to some tough situations at Corinth, adds a word of thanksgiving to God. He writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you. . . ."

You see, thanksgiving comes early this year.

Second, you and I are privileged to give thanks for five specific God-given gifts.

Paul is now far away in Ephesus. He thinks back on his 18-24 months with the believers in Corinth. He knows their weaknesses. He sees their flaws. But he has that quality every good pastor has. There's a deep love of the people he had been privileged to serve. He knew his own weaknesses, as does any good pastor. So just as a good father or mother affirms that essential family solidarity, even when rebuke and discipline must be given, so too it's important that there be a similar affirmation to brothers and sisters in Christ, even in the most difficult circumstances of sin and broken relationship. Erupting deep out of the heart of the pastor is a thanksgiving to God for his people. I, along with the Apostle Paul, give five huge utterances of thanks to God always for you.

One, I thank God that you are the objects of His grace.

What a word: grace. God's unmerited favor. Have you repented of sin and opened your life, receiving God's gift of love and forgiveness? If you have ever done this, you are genuinely saved. On another occasion, Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, declaring, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Everything in the world is for sale except grace. God's salvation is unearned by us. We live in a commercial society. It's almost impossible for us to believe that we can't earn salvation.

Every so often I make a journal entry in my spiritual diary. Some of the entries are words of thanksgiving and joy. Some of the entries honestly deal with the tough stuff of family living and my own personal failures. I can't stand in this pulpit in front of you as a man worthy of calling you to right relationship with God in a way that dumps on you for your failures. Daily, I'm aware of my own shortcomings, my own need of God's forgiveness and grace. Every so often, I open my journals and read back a few years. When I do, I become increasingly aware of my dependence upon the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm so grateful to Him that I'm a forgiven person. And I'm so grateful to Him that you also are the object of His grace, if you receive His gift. Paul says, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus. . ." (1 Cor. 1:4).

Two, I thank God that Jesus Christ has made you a rich person.

Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you. . .for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind-just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you. . ." (1 Cor. 1:4-6).

The key word here is enriched. As tough as circumstances had become in Corinth, the fact is that they were elaborately endowed. They had been presented the message from the Scriptures. They had good teaching. They had been faithfully instructed by Paul, Apollos and Peter. God had invested in them, as He has invested in you.

What a rich heritage we have here at St. Andrew's. God has given us so much. The word "enriched" in the Greek literally means "endowment."

We read about academic institutions such as Harvard, Princeton, Yale that have huge financial endowments. Investments have been made over hundreds of years in those magnificent institutions of higher learning that enable them to have the finest buildings, the best of faculties, the most superb intellectual resources that money can buy.

As a Christian, you have been endowed. God has made all the provision you need through the local church, the ministry of His Holy Spirit, through the many gracious influences upon your life, enriching you beyond anything that you probably have ever realized.

We, as a church, have been richly endowed. Now I'm not talking about money. I'm talking about God's investment of His resources in us, individually and corporately.

I pastored a church in Pittsburgh with a large endowment. Millions of dollars were at work, spinning off cash to help finance that ministry. All bills were paid on a magnificent gothic cathedral and a 350-acre, year-round camp in the Ligonier Valley, 60 miles east of Pittsburgh.

Here at St. Andrew's, our endowment is very small. I encourage you to include this church in your will, so that when you die, you at least tithe the equity you've built up in this life to the work of the Lord, letting your children know your priorities. But financial riches are not the key to a healthy church or a healthy individual Christian life. The true endowment is God's spiritual investment in us as individuals and as a congregation. God's true endowment in you as an individual is not how much money you have in the bank and how large is your investment portfolio, but what riches in Jesus Christ God has invested in you, of which you are privileged to be a steward. You and I come into this world owning nothing. No matter how much we gather of this world's good, we exit with absolutely nothing of a material nature.

Kenneth L. Chafin told of a memorial service at which he officiated for a Dr. Ray Collins of Houston. For sixty years, Dr. Collins had practiced medicine. He had reared his children in the church and watched his grandchildren into adulthood to give him great-grandchildren. When at age 94 after two very difficult years, he passed on, the family experienced a sense of gratitude for his life and the fact that the suffering was over. Chafin describes driving in the procession to the cemetery for the interment. The Collins plot was in the same cemetery where the late Howard Hughes is buried. Chafin writes, "As the procession passed the Hughes grave I thought of the difference between his life and Dr. Collins'. Howard Hughes was perceived as the richest man in the world, but he died alone without support of family or friends and is remembered chiefly by the courtroom struggles for his money. Dr. Collins was a man who, I thank God that He has given you spiritual gifts.

Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you because. . .you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:4-7). The key word here is charisma. You have great untapped resources. You have tremendous potential.

Sometimes, I complain about my lot in life until I'm reminded of those words, "Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father above." How blessed you are. How blessed am I. I am a trustee of these tremendous endowments, these gifts God has invested in me as an individual. God has given you everything that you need. You're not lacking in any spiritual gift that you need. What you as an individual may not have, those gifts are realized in this larger community of the church. That's why we need each other. The problem with the church at Corinth was that they misused their gifts. You and I can do that, or we can fail to adequately appropriate those gifts that are ours, not realizing our potential. God forgive you and me if we let His potential, His gifts, His spiritual gifts slip through our fingers.

Four, I thank God that He has given you assurance that you will be blameless in the Day of Judgment.

Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you. . .that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:4-8).

Do you know anyone who, when they read a mystery novel, reads the last chapter first? In a way, it sort of spoils the story, doesn't it? But that's not the way with the Christian life. God has made you blameless. Right now, even in your imperfections, you know the conclusion. He himself bore your and my sins on the cross that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. We are made blameless before Him. There is nothing you have ever done or could ever do that is unforgivable, as you come in repentance to that One who is your Savior and Lord.

Five, I thank God that He has given you His gift of faithfulness.

Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you because. . .God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:4-9).

Can you ask for anything better than that? In an age of unfaithfulness, when some of us have had our hearts broken by the unfaithfulness of others, God is always faithful. Great is His faithfulness. Amazing is His grace.

I beg you this morning, whatever the struggles of your life may be, let thanksgiving come early this year. Thank God for His many blessings. See yourself as one who is a part of the family of God, one of His saints, thankful for His grace, riches, spiritual gifts, forgiveness and faithfulness.

To God be the glory for His amazing grace!