

Holy by Grace. Bound for Glory. Now What?

Called and Blessed

I Corinthians 1:1-9

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

- I Corinthians 1:1-9, ESV

Who Are You? Why?

If you were asked (not by your pastor) to identify yourself in five words or less, what would you say? How about just one or two words, in addition to your name? So, “Hi. My name is Jason Van Bommel, and I am a _____.” In our culture, we’re pretty much expected to answer with our occupation. So, I am a pastor.

Interestingly, recent analysis of poll data suggests that Americans are starting to view their political affiliation as the core of their personal identity, more core and unchangeable than our generation, occupation, religion, interests, or even gender. So, it seems that if people were to really state the core of how they view themselves, they would say, “I am a conservative.” Or “I am a progressive.” Maybe “I am a moderate,” but I’m guessing people who identify as moderates probably don’t feel that way.

Based on the way some cars or some people’s homes are adorned, you might guess that some people’s core identity is with their favorite sports team. “I am a Ravens fan.” Or, “I am a Sixers fan.” Or, “I am a Terp.” (I am a Terp, by the way. But that’s certainly not my core identity.)

The interesting thing about identity issues is that we often take on an identity without really thinking about it. Sometimes it takes an attack or a question or challenge to cause us to realize what our identity really is, and sometimes it’s different than what we might think.

Paul always opens his letters by identifying himself and the recipients of his letter. Now, in a sense, this is just proper form for ancient letter writing. Just like we address an envelope a certain way when we mail it, in the ancient world, when people opened a scroll and began to read it, they expected to see right away who this letter is from and if it’s addressed to them or not.

But Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, does not waste words, ever. So, in the standard greeting which opens his letter to the Corinthian church, he packs so much rich truth and important truth. It has been about 4-5 years since Paul left Corinth. He returned to Antioch in Syria after he left

Corinth, and then later went out on a 3rd missionary journey, to visit and strengthen the churches he had planted in Asia Minor/Turkey. During this third missionary journey, he spent two years in Ephesus.

While he is in Ephesus, Sosthenes comes and visits Paul, probably bringing some questions from the church at Corinth. Also, Paul had received reports about the church in Corinth from a group of people associated with Chloe, referred to as “Chloe’s people” in verse 11. So, the first six chapters of I Corinthians are spent responding to the reports Paul has received, and then starting in chapter 7, he responds to specific questions the Corinthians had sent him, probably through Sosthenes.

A. Called, vv. 1-2

In identifying himself and the church in Corinth, Paul refers to both of them as “called” –

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

1. Paul, an apostle

Paul was “called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus,” or, even more literally, “called an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” What’s clear from this expression is that Paul’s apostolic ministry is neither *from* himself nor *about* himself. Paul didn’t put himself into ministry. He was called by the will of God, not his own will. He also does not minister in his own name and his ministry is not about himself and what he can offer churches. He is an apostle of Christ Jesus. That is, he is one sent by and representing the Messiah Jesus.

When we read Paul’s conversion experience in Acts 9, we do not get the slightest hint that Paul was uncertain or questioning himself and his life direction. He was a rising star in Jerusalem, personally sent as an emissary (we might even say “apostle,” because that would be the right Greek word) from the Jerusalem High Council, the Sanhedrin, the same group that had condemned Jesus to death and that had stoned Stephen, the first martyr, in Acts 7. Paul was riding to Damascus, successful and confident that he was serving God by extinguishing this upstart group of blasphemers who were teaching people to put their faith in Jesus of Nazareth, a dead imposter, a fake Messiah.

Jesus stopped Saul of Tarsus on that road to Damascus. Jesus confronted him, saved him, and sent him out as an apostle of the very One he was trying to extinguish. This was God’s doing, not Paul’s. He knew who called him, and he knew who he would answer to for the ministry he had been given. This gave him an authority that had nothing to do with himself and everything to do with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The church of God, saints

Paul then calls the Corinthians “*the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.*” Just as Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus, they are the church of God. They belong to God, not to Sosthenes or Paul or Crispus or Titius Justus. This is important because later Paul will have to address the fact that the church had been dividing itself up into factions and identifying with certain prominent men – Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter). No church ever belongs to any man. We sometimes talk this way, but it’s just not true or helpful to identify churches with the people God has called to help shepherd them. Pastors are called to serve churches, but churches belong to God alone.

“*To those sanctified*” is in the perfect tense, indicating completed action – “*To those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints.*” “*Having been sanctified*” and “*saints*” are two forms of the same word, which is the word for “holy” – set apart by God and for God. So, we could literally translate this as “*to those who have been made holy in Christ Jesus, called the holy ones.*” Is that a scary way to think of identifying yourself. “Hi, I’m Jason Van Bommel, and I’m holy.” “I’m a saint.” That sounds really weird and arrogant and just wrong, at some level, doesn’t it? Yet that’s exactly how Paul addresses this church.

If you know anything at all about the church in Corinth as they’re addressed and treated by Paul in this letter, you know one thing: This as a messed up church. Can we come up with a quick laundry list of their issues and problems?

1. Division: They divided themselves up into parties within the church, identifying themselves by the popular apostles or teachers they followed. They would judge and look down on the others in the other groups.
2. Sexual Immorality: They had a church member who was sleeping with his father’s wife, and the rest of the church seemed to accept this and even boast about their “tolerance” of this. Other church members were apparently visiting prostitutes,
3. Gluttony/Drunkenness: Their fellowship meals/love feasts, which included the Lord’s Supper, featured people who showed up early and drank all the wine, getting drunk and not saving any wine for the late-comers.
4. Greed: They took each other to court and sued each other over financial disputes.
5. Pride: They competed with each other in the exercise of spiritual gifts, boasting of whose gift was better than the others.
6. Judgmentalism: They judged each other over the meat they ate and the festivals they observed.
7. Heresy: Some within the church were teaching that believers were not going to be resurrected from the dead, but that they would only spiritually live with God for eternity.

When we lived in Atlanta, one of the “back roads” ways we could get into the city (avoiding the frequent traffic nightmares on the highways) took us past First Corinthian Baptist Church. I usually did a double-take when I passed by this church and wondered who in the world would name their church after the church in I Corinthians. I have since learned that there are several First Corinthian Baptist Churches, including one in Baltimore. Still seems like a strange name for a church. We definitely did not consider that one when we were coming up with the very originally named “Forest Hill Presbyterian.”

As we go through this book, we will see that we actually have much in common – probably too much in common – with this very less-than-perfect church. But for now, I just want to marvel at the reality that

Paul calls this dysfunctional, fractious, contentious, immoral, misguided group *“those who have been made holy in Christ Jesus, called the holy ones.”*

How is this possible? It’s possible in the same way that you and I *“have been made holy”* and are, in fact, *“called saints.”* It is not some super-class of extra-obedient Christians who *“have been made holy”* and who are *“called saints.”* No, this is the true core identity of everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation, and it is our identity because of Jesus Christ alone. We *“have been made holy in Christ Jesus”* and we are *“called saints”* by the same will of God that called Paul an apostle.

So, as strange as it might sound – and I don’t really recommend going around saying this to people, unless you want to lose friends and alienate people – your core identity as a believer is that you have been sanctified in Jesus and you are a saint. You have been made holy and you are called holy. Here’s how Hebrews 10:14 expresses the saving work of Jesus on the cross: *“For by a single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”*

If you are a “work in progress,” someone who still has a long way to go in the process of sanctification, then you should know that the once-for-all perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the cross has, in fact, perfected you for all time in the eyes of God. You are holy. You are a saint - because of Jesus and Jesus alone.

3. Called together

But it’s not just you. We are *“called saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.”* We are always tempted to think either too lowly of ourselves or too highly. We can sometimes vacillate between feeling like miserable wretched sinners and like those who are the chosen few, the enlightened remnant of those who “really get it.” Both of these attitudes are wrong, because they’re both focused on ourselves.

If we belong to Jesus Christ, then our lives are wrapped up in Him. We are His and He is ours.

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” – Galatians 2:20, ESV

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” – Colossians 3:1-4, ESV

And these things are not just true of you and me and those who are very much like us. No, this is the truth about ALL who belong to Jesus; He is both their Lord and ours. This is not some exclusive enclave of Bible scholars and proper theologians.

B. Blessed

If we belong to Jesus Christ by faith, not only have we been sanctified and not only are we called saints, but we are greatly blessed:

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I. Because of the grace of God

Just as it was the grace of God which called us and saved us, so it is also by the grace of God that we are blessed. Paul specifically emphasizes the gifts God has given His church. “*In every way you were enriched in Him in all speech and all knowledge . . . so that you are not lacking in any gift.*”

Greek culture tended to highly prize knowledge and speaking. The philosophers who were praised were known as those who had great knowledge and who could speak really well. The church at Corinth had picked up this value system from their culture, and they identified themselves with the men who they thought had the greatest knowledge and speaking ability – Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter). None of these men were in their local church, of course. These were the church celebrities.

Paul wants them to know that they, as a church, had been gifted with all of the speech and knowledge they need to grow in Christ to the glory of God. They didn’t need to look to celebrity apostles and evangelists, for they had been given the gifts they needed right there within their local church in Corinth.

In the evangelical world today, we are blessed to have so much rich teaching and excellent insight into God’s word available to us on the internet. I benefit from these blessings myself, but they are no replacement for the local church and for the gifts God has given us.

2. Lacking nothing

God saves His own, gathers us into a local church, and gifts us with all we need to grow in Him. Because we are His church and not the church of any man, we can trust Him to provide the gifting the church needs to grow as He calls us to grow.

Do we trust God to provide, and can we say with confidence in Him, that we, as a body, are lacking nothing?

By the way, it’s not just Paul who expresses this truth. Here’s how Peter opens 2 Peter –

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence

God has “granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” . . . “so that you are not lacking in any gift.” But this is not individually given, but God has given His gifts to the gathered believers in the church, to be exercised in the church fellowship.

C. Sustained by God’s Faithfulness

Well, if that’s who we are and how we’ve been blessed, where are we going? Besides identity, the key issue that drives our lives is aspiration. This sermon series is called “Holy by Grace. Bound for Glory, Now what?” “Holy by Grace” speaks to our identity – and we could add, “greatly blessed and completely equipped together.” (But that would make for a *really* long title.) “Bound for Glory” speaks to our destination, and our destination should shape our aspiration. If we know where we’re going, then we should be aspiring to make progress toward that destination, right?

When I’m on a long flight, I know my aspiration – to arrive and get off the plane. Planes are now equipped with flight trackers that show you where you are in your flight path – how long you’ve been in the air, how long remains until you reach your destination. We aren’t given the same flight path information on our long journey through this life, but here’s what we know: We are called saints and made holy by God’s grace through the work of Jesus Christ, and we are headed for glory.

A few months ago, I heard a really good message from Rico Tice, given at Alistair Begg’s Basics Conference in May. In it, he shared that he begins each day by asking himself four questions, which put things into focus:

1. When was I converted? (Romans 8:30 & Ephesians 1:3-4)
2. How does God feel about me? (Romans 1:16-17)
3. What makes today a great day? (Romans 8:28-29)
4. What makes today better than yesterday? (Romans 8:18)

What makes today better than yesterday? Because I’m one day closer to glory.

What’s going to get me to glory? *“as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

The Lord Jesus Christ will sustain me to the end. God is faithful. That’s our hope. The sustaining grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the unfailing faithfulness of God. It is not my grip on Him, but His grip on me that is my sure and unfailing hope.

So, what is my aspiration? To be firmly held and to grow in my love, thankfulness, and responsiveness to Him. I want to grow in the holiness that He has given me. I want to grow in the knowledge of Him He has given me. I want to grow in gratitude and confidence and in my love for those He has called to walk

with me and live with me in this local body of Christ and in the worldwide body of Christ. I want to live out the reality of who I am and where I'm going.

If I am holy by grace, and I am bound for glory, my answer to "Now what?" is simple – Lord, let me live like it!