

# 1 Corinthians 1.1-17

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## *Waiting Eagerly*

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 12 September 2021

1 Corinthians – Seeing the Son [1]

### **Series Introduction: Seeing the Son**

Sometimes it's easy to pick and design a sermon series – this one was hard. I couldn't figure out what to do... And then one morning 1 Corinthians 1-4 popped into my head. I dismissed it because in many ways the church in Corinth was a complete mess – and I didn't want to suggest that's what I think about you, because I don't think Christ Church is in a mess!

At the same time, a phrase from a sermon I watched last year wouldn't stop running through my head: **'failure is succeeding at things that don't matter.'** *Repeat*

God wouldn't let me forget that phrase, nor 1 Corinthians 1-4, and when I finally gave in and actually *read* those four chapters, I realised that Paul's primary concern was to remind the Christians in Corinth of *what really matters*.

They thought they were so successful. In a human sense, many of them were wealthy because Corinth was a trade hub linking Asia and Italy. Like a modern city it was busy and vibrant – and also, like a modern city, it had poverty and forgotten people.

The church also appeared successful, with plenty of money, lots of people, a good variety of people, and passionate worship.

But somewhere, along the way, they had lost sight of what comes first. They were caught up in cliques and arguments – even to the point of suing one another – and while their worship was rightly Spirit-filled, it was also rowdy and uncontrolled. Some of them even got drunk when they celebrated Holy Communion!

**In their church life they were reflecting the world and its values, instead of reflecting Jesus to that world.**

All their problems stemmed from the fact that Jesus was no longer at the centre; when we lose sight of our identity in Jesus, the anchor of who we *are* in him, then what we *do* comes adrift.

So Paul wrote to remind them of what *really* matters. In these chapters he relentlessly calls Christians then and now back to Jesus. He reminds us to follow *Jesus*, not the latest fad, not our own desires, not even our church leaders: but to follow *Jesus*.

As we emerge from the pandemic, I want us to make sure we don't fall into the same traps as the Corinthians. I want us to make sure we don't reflect the world and its values, but Jesus to that world. I want us to make sure we don't succeed at things that don't matter. I want us to make sure we don't forget who we *are* in Jesus while we *do* things.

The only way to avoid those traps is to make sure we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. That's why I've called this series 'Seeing the Son'. My prayer is that these chapters will set the right tone for the next season of our church life together, and help us – maybe even for the first time – see Jesus, so we can follow *him* faithfully.

## Waiting

How good are you at waiting? I'll be honest, it's not my greatest strength. I hope that over the years I've grown more patient – though I still don't like waiting for things, especially traffic.

Did you hear about the duck waiting to cross the road? The chicken walked past and said, 'I wouldn't bother mate, you'll never hear the end of it.'

Our experience of waiting varies from the minor irritation of a long traffic light, to years of praying for something to happen. Sometimes God seems so slow to act – or he seems not to act at all. *Pause* We'll come back to the theme of waiting later, but first let's dive into Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

(A brief footnote for those of you of a pedantic nature – this isn't actually Paul's *first* letter to the church in Corinth – but it is the first one we have. What we call Second Corinthians is most likely at least the *fourth* of Paul's letters to that church. What does that tell us? Not a lot – except that Paul wrote a lot of letters, and that God decided we don't need to know what they all said!)

Today I'd like to pick out three words: Called, Graced, United – and then we'll return to see what we've learned about Waiting.

## We are... Called (1-3)

First then, we are **called**. Paul begins most of his letters the same way: with his name (Paul), his job (apostle), and his boss (Jesus) – for example (1), **Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus**.

Paul didn't choose to be an apostle – he was *called*, by Jesus, and according to **the will of God**. He was **called**, and sent (for that's what the word 'apostle' means – a person who is sent).

What about you? Do *you* feel 'called'? Too often in church circles we limit the word 'calling' to describe those called – like Paul, like me – to be church leaders.

But when we do that, we make a lesser calling more important than a greater calling. For the greater – the *greatest* calling – is into God's family. Verse 2:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and **called** to be his holy people...

*1 Corinthians 1.2 (NIV)*

In Jesus Christ God is making a new people, a new *family* – one that doesn't depend on your parents or where you are born, which *anyone* can join – if they respond to God's call.

Now, there's a little pun here that is lost in translation – and I think you are all starting to realise, perhaps with a sinking feeling, that I like a pun.

Verse 2 could be translated like this:

.. to those who *have been made holy* in Christ Jesus, called to *be holy* people...

*1 Corinthians 1.2 (my translation)*

Wait a minute. Are we holy *already*, or is God calling us to *be* holy? Yes (!).

Think of it like this: are you married on your wedding day when you've said your vows and signed the register – or are you married after a lifetime of faithfulness and love? Yes!

Am I married to Jess? Yes. Is my marriage to Jess complete? No. In a sense then, my marriage has *already* happened, on 1 August 2015, but it is *not yet* complete. And so as Jess's husband I live out the day-to-day reality of something that has already happened in the past.

It's not a perfect picture but hopefully it illustrates something of what Paul is talking about here.

God's people are *already holy* because of what Jesus has *already done* when he died on the cross, rose to life on the third day, and ascended into heaven. That has happened, it cannot be changed, it can never be taken away, it is solid rock, a concrete foundation.

God's people are called *to be holy*, to live out the reality of what has already happened, amid the pain and the mess and the sin of this world, to be a sign to that world that there is something more, something better, which can be found in Jesus.

The Christian life is not about striving for something we don't have, but taking hold of something we've been given.

The Christian life is not about building up enough credit to buy the life we've always wanted, but receiving that life from Jesus for free, through daily repentance and forgiveness.

The Christian life is about responding to a call, the call to *be* what we *already are*, the call to live out daily what God has already done for us in Jesus, to be every day who we already are in Jesus.

As Paul puts it elsewhere: **live a life worthy of the calling you have received... you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light** (Ephesians 4.1, 5.8).

What we do matters – but who we are in Jesus comes first.

## We are... Graced (4-9)

I said we would be picking out three words from this passage today. The first is **called** – can anyone remember the second?

**Grace.** We are *graced*.

A vicar was invited to lunch by one of his parishioners. As he sat down at the table with the family, the mum asked their daughter to say grace before the meal.

She sat in silence for a while, looking worried. ‘I don’t know what to say, Mummy,’ she said.

‘That’s ok, darling,’ said her mum, smiling at the vicar, ‘Just use what Daddy said before we ate breakfast this morning.’

The little girl folded her hands, bowed her head, and said in a loud voice, ‘Oh God, why did you invite that idiot over for lunch?’

But what *is* ‘grace’? It’s clearly something more than the prayer some of us say before we eat, because Paul says in verse 4:

I always thank my God for you because of his **grace** given you in Christ Jesus.

*1 Corinthians 1.4 (NIV)*



Some clever person once figured out you could turn it into an acronym: ‘God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense’. G.R.A.C.E. Sometimes it is described as ‘free unmerited favour’ – something we don’t deserve, and don’t have to pay for.

Those descriptions are right and good – but grace is also *more* than that. Grace is not *simply* an undeserved gift – it is the transforming power of God, it is an *effective* gift.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and philosopher Bono wrote this:

Grace, it’s the name for a girl

It’s also a thought that changed the world.

*Grace, U2*

Look again at v4 with me – only this time we’ll carry on into v6:

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you.

*1 Corinthians 1.4-6 (NIV)*

Grace isn’t simply something the Christians in Corinth have been **given** – it has *changed* them, **enriched** them **in every way**, and that change *proves* that what Paul said about Jesus is true.

It's like yeast. If I gave you a packet of powder and told you it was yeast, you might believe me – you might call the police. The way to 'prove' it is to mix it into some dough.

As the proof of the yeast is in the rising, so the proof of the gospel is in the lives of those who believe it for we are *transformed* by it. Grace is both the way God *creates* his family, and how he *enables* us to live *in* his family *as* his children.

Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

*1 Corinthians 1.7 (NIV)*

Those **spiritual gifts**, which include among other things **speech** and **knowledge** (5) – Paul talks more about them all later in the letter – are given to help and enable us to be the people we are, to be the people God has made and called us to be: his children.

Paul says to the Corinthians – and to us – don't think you do any of this yourselves, don't get ideas above your station; for all you have comes from God in Jesus. It is a gift, an *effective* gift, that transforms us into a family, a **fellowship with his Son, Jesus** (9). Our part is to join in with what God is doing.

## We are... United? (10-17)

(1) We are called. (2) We are graced. (3) We are... united?

Why do all Maths teachers wear glasses?

Because they help with di-vision.

...

A Christian is stranded on a desert island all by himself.

After many years he is rescued. As he's pulled aboard the rescue ship, the captain asks him what the three buildings on the island are.

'Ah, that one's my house,' says the Christian, 'And that one's my church.'

'What about the third building?' asks the Captain.

'Ah,' says the Christian, 'That's the church I *used* to go to.'

If I asked you to describe the global Church, I doubt many of you – if any – would use the word 'united'. Even *within* the same church there are often many divisions. Corinth was no different:

One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas', still another, 'I follow Christ.'

*1 Corinthians 1.12 (NIV)*

It hurts Paul that the church family he planted in Corinth is now so divided. **I appeal to you, brothers and sisters**, he says (10), **my brothers and sisters** he begs (11)... Don't forget who you are,

agree with one another in what you say... be perfectly united in mind and thought.

*1 Corinthians 1.10 (NIV)*

Now Paul *doesn't* mean that every Christian should be the same.

It's like the difference between a choir singing in unison and in harmony.

When we sing in *unison*, everyone sings the same words and the same tune.

When we sing in *harmony*, we sing the same words but with *different* tunes that work and weave together to create a beautiful *harmonious* sound.

Later in this letter Paul uses the example of a single body, made up of many parts. The parts are not all the same, but all work together in harmony so the body can see, hear, taste, smell.

The thing that unites God's people – or at least the thing that *should* unite us – is the same person through whom we are called, the same person through whom we receive grace: Jesus Christ.

Look with me at verse 13:

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul?

*1 Corinthians 1.13 (NIV)*

No, no, and no!

First, *every* Christian receives *all* the blessings of Christ (5) – there is no hierarchy or favouritism. Jesus is not divided.

Second, many people were crucified by the Romans – but only *Jesus'* death brings forgiveness. Paul was not crucified for us, nor anyone else; only Jesus. The power to save is not in clever words or fancy arguments, but only in the cross of Jesus Christ (17).

Third, when we are baptised in God's name we pass from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom where Jesus is Lord. Six times in these verses Paul calls *Jesus* **Lord** (2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10). Our Lord is not Paul, nor anyone else, but Jesus.

Forget your petty divisions, Paul says, see past your differences and your preferences, put aside your arguments and your earthly desires: and **be perfectly united in mind and thought** (10), by *seeing Jesus*.

## We are... Waiting (7)

We are called. We are graced. We are – or should do our best to be – united. And, we are... *waiting*. Paul says (7):

..eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

*1 Corinthians 1.7 (NIV)*

This brings together everything we have thought about so far this morning. Waiting is a regular theme in the Bible, particularly in the psalms and prophets when they talk about the night watch waiting for the dawn.

The night watchman can do absolutely nothing to hasten the dawn – but while he waits for the dawn he gets on with his duties, staying alert to dangers, looking forward to the light of the new day, trusting that the dawn will come.

Sometimes the wait is over in a blink – other times the night drags on, in seemingly never-ending darkness. In those times when we feel so far from the dawn, so far from God, when our strength and our faith are failing, we need to let go and let *God* hold *us*. As the psalmist says, **if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast** (Psalm 139.10).

Who we are depends not on how tightly we can grip onto God, but on *he* who holds *us* fast. Maybe today you need to let go, and let God hold *you*. Maybe today you need to look up from your pain and your troubles, to see Jesus by your side.

*Pause*

We wait eagerly by focusing on what matters:

- we are **called**, called to live out who we already are in Jesus;
- we are **graced**, transformed in Jesus so we can live out the life he gives to all who repent;
- we are **united**, so let's fix our eyes on Jesus.

*Father, thank you for who we are and who you have called us to be in Jesus. Thank you for your grace that transforms us. Help us to be united in Jesus, keeping our eyes fixed on him, waiting eagerly for him to be revealed. May we learn what it means to live as your children, every day and in every way. Amen.*