

THE CHURCH'S HOLINESS IS GOD'S HOLINESS
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany, 2026
1 Corinthians 1:1-9

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Second Reading from before, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9: Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Apostle Paul knew that of himself, he was nothing.¹ After his conversion on the road to Damascus, *he had no intention* of building a personal following and deplored the formation of a “Paul” faction. He saw himself simply as servant and witness of the crucified and risen Lord, Christ Jesus, Israel’s promised Messiah and the Saviour of the world. The former persecutor of the church had now found his great vocation in pointing others to Christ. His most important labour was in ensuring that Christ was formed in others.² His concern to advance the name and cause of Christ emerges clearly in the opening verses of this Letter to the Corinthians, where “Christ” occurs nine times in the nine verses that make up our text. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, “*For me to live is Christ* (Phil. 1:21).

It was not from men nor through a man that Paul had been commissioned to serve Christ, but through the will of God. Unlike the false apostles who commended themselves and sought to impose their own will on the church, *Paul’s ministry bore the divine stamp of approval*. Yet despite his standing as a divinely called apostle, Paul never operated as a “one-man band.” His ministry was always a team effort, whether he was associated with Barnabas, Silas and Timothy, various “brothers,” or, as here, Sosthenes. This is more than likely the same Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18, who had served as the synagogue ruler during Paul’s first visit to Corinth. Like Crispus, another synagogue ruler before him, Sosthenes found Paul’s preaching compelling, but his Christian leanings incurred the hostility of his fellow Jews, who beat him in front of the Roman governor Gallio. It seems that after this, Sosthenes left Corinth and settled in Ephesus. As a former synagogue official, and moreover as one who had been beaten for the sake of Christ, Sosthenes would have been honoured by the Corinthian church.

I wonder if the Corinthians would have blushed when they heard how Paul addressed them in the opening of his letter. “**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....**”

Surely their consciences would have told them they were anything *but* saints. This congregation was plagued by divisions and factions, jealousy and strife. They were taking one another to court, indulging in sexual immorality, and their worship services had degenerated into displays of selfishness and sinning against Christ’s body and blood. How can it be that these people could be sanctified, that is, called “holy”?

Perhaps the same could be asked about any of us here today. Do our consciences speak to us if or when we are addressed by someone as ‘saints’? We live in a world that has fallen and is quickly passing away. Yes, we consider ourselves followers of Christ, but are we *really that different from the rest of the world?* At times, it may not seem so. We disagree, fight, and squabble with one another. We strive after earthly things instead of the things of heaven. We pollute ourselves by indulging in sinful desires and activities. Most of the time, we are far from being saints.

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:11

² Galatians 4:19

Thanks be to God that the *holiness* of the Church doesn't depend on the people who walk in the door, but rather God's gift in Christ. ***Holiness is received, not achieved.*** There is no one holy except the Lord God. He alone sanctifies and makes holy, and He does that by granting participation in His holiness and His holy kingdom. That takes place when He calls us into Christ and His holiness through baptism into His death. The Church received her holiness in baptism. Paul wrote, "*But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God*" (1 Cor. 6:11).

Baptism is not something done in remembrance of the Christ who *was*. It's the sign of the Christ who *is*. He is still here bringing the advent of the new creation in the hearts and lives of those dead in sin. Therefore, the Church's holiness is God's holiness, not the people's. It comes to us from heaven. He came to us from heaven. *This means the Church's holiness does not depend on the holiness of its members, but on Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the Church*. God brings His holiness wherever He is, and since He is always present in the Word and Sacraments, the Church is holy *despite its members' failings*.

St. Paul not only acknowledges the Corinthians' status as holy in Christ Jesus, but he also gives thanks **"because of the grace of God that was given (to them) in Christ Jesus."**

From the fullness of the unspeakable gift of Christ Himself, the congregation had received "*grace upon grace*" (John 1:16). Ever since their baptism, they had enjoyed a rich and full spiritual life. In Christ, they had been enriched **"in all speech and all knowledge."** Their rich endowment in "speech" included the gift of tongues and its interpretation, prophecy and the weighing of prophecy, teaching, and the composing of hymns. This gift of speech flowed from the "knowledge" that was in their hearts, and like "speech," "knowledge" is a comprehensive word. It includes the Corinthians' Spirit-given understanding of the wisdom of the cross, their appreciation of all God's gifts, their ability to exercise spiritual judgment, and the specific gift of prophetic knowledge. These two gifts — the utterance of the mouth and the knowledge of the heart — find an echo in Romans 10:9: "*If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*"

Paul thanks God for the congregation's outstanding endowment with these gifts, which, in themselves, were signs of God's rich gift of grace; in fact, those gifts were an indication that Christ was still present in their midst, but problems had arisen in the Corinthian Church because some were letting their gifts go to their heads, as though they had acquired them through their own efforts or brilliance. It seems that sinners will always find ways to abuse the gifts God gives.

We, too, have been enriched in every way, being blessed by God in so many ways, but we must realise that the blessings bestowed upon us do not come because of our own efforts. Rather, the blessings we receive from our God come from Him because they are His gifts from the cross. He gives, and we receive, and where His gifts are, there is His kingdom.

And so God's gifts of grace *in the Church* become the source of strength for us in this fallen and dying world. Already now, the new world that is yet to come is breaking through in Christ and continues to shine forth through His gifts of Word and Sacrament.

The Word we hear is not just a recitation and repetition of words long ago, but the *actual words of God*, coming from His mouth, while the Sacraments are the ways the Lord continues to deal with His people, bringing new life and giving the benefits of His atoning sacrifice. The Lord, who came to this world in human flesh, has not left it. He is still present, bringing us His kingdom by bringing us into fellowship with Him.

And so, as we look forward to the day when the old world has passed out of existence, and the fullness of the new creation will be fully revealed, we know it is the mercy of God Himself and His faithfulness that will **"sustain (us) to the end."** He will sustain us so that we shall be **"guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."**

Being “guiltless” does not mean, of course, that the last advent will find us morally perfect. No, the assurance is that no one will be able to bring a charge against us,³ for Christ Jesus has become our righteousness.

The greatest gift of all we have is the forgiveness of all sin, knowing that we who are guilt-ridden have been set free and so shall stand before the throne of God on that day to be received with all the holy ones into His holy glory. Our Saviour’s promise is that He will keep us in the faith until the end comes. This is a special assurance to all those who await His return. Paul assures the Corinthians that they can count on God to keep the saving faith alive in their hearts, so that they will be with their Lord in eternity, and that is an assurance for us too. God keeps His promises to His believers, who share in the life of His Son.

There are those who will settle for hoping that they have done enough here to be received there. But this is not the way it is in His Church. Here, we *have already* been received into fellowship with Christ and have our being in Him. This is not like any other earthly fellowship. No, this is fellowship with Christ Jesus. This is what we share.

The Church isn’t the place we pursue our interests. It’s the place where Christ pursues His Father’s will — the salvation of sinners. It’s the place where Christ comes to take us into Himself and His glory. And so to the church gathering here today, **“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: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

³ Romans 8:33