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TWELVE
CHALLENGES
CHURCHES
FACE

MARK
DEVER

Twelve Challenges Churches Face

Copyright 2008 by Mark E. Dever

Published by Crossway Books

a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jon McGrath

Cover photo: iStock

First printing 2008

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dever, Mark.

12 challenges churches face / Mark E. Dever.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-1-58134-944-3 (hc)

1. Bible. N.T. Corinthians, 1st—Criticism, interpretation, etc.
2. Church.
3. Sin—Christianity. I. Title. II. Title: Twelve challenges churches face.

BS2675.6.C5.D48 2008

262—dc22

2007044622

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PREFACE

TWELVE CHALLENGES CHURCHES FACE

Do you think the biggest problems facing your church are extraordinary situations, providing better grief counseling, or improving your singing? I think God's Word has some other ideas of what challenges your church faces. Some more ordinary challenges. Some more theological challenges.

I've never bought into the idea that theology is always academic, obscure, and secondary. To me, knowledge of God has always drawn me to know God (hardly an obscure or merely academic task!). The Bible presents example after example of theology applied to life. And one of the prime examples of this is 1 Corinthians.

First Corinthians is a fascinating book. It's a confusing book. It's a book that is mined for proof texts on various topics. And it is undeniably a powerful book. Paul had clearly discovered in Christ the freedom to lay aside his own rights in order to love and serve others. This work of Christ's Spirit in him brought insights into the nature of preaching the gospel, of living a holy life as a whole church, the willingness to be wronged, to forgo rightful pleasure if other people would benefit from his abstinence. On and on we could go. The love Paul knew from Christ was used by the Holy Spirit to unlock the riches of both understanding and applying the gospel to the life of a congregation that Paul knew and loved.

In this letter, 1 Corinthians, Paul astonishes the pastor (at least, he did me). When he was facing the most normal of problems (division in the church, worldliness, selfishness, and others) he reached for deeply theological responses. Paul called the Corinthian congregation to be not divided but united, not worldly but holy, not selfish but loving. That's not the surprising part. The surprising part is how he argued this with them. He called them to forsake divisions, because God is one. He called them to forsake sin, because God is holy. He called them to forsake selfishness, because God is loving. In all of this, the governing presupposition is not that the church should operate by a rule book of spiritual manners and etiquette, but that the church is a living reflection of the living God. There is one God. He is holy and has given himself in love. His church, therefore, should reflect his own character; we should be united and holy and loving or else we lie about him! That is a powerful thought.

I hope and pray that these sermons will provoke for you encouraging meditation on God, on how he has loved us in Jesus Christ, and on how that should provoke us to seek to live in that same love.

Thanks to Crossway for initiating and pursuing this project, and special thanks to Lydia Brownback—capable, kind, and patient editor.

These are a series of sermons I preached at the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC from the end of August 2005 until the beginning of January 2006, which explains the New Year's introduction to the final chapter and also the opening illustration of chapter 11, "Death," which was the title of my sermon on Christmas morning 2005. The sermons were used of God in my life, in our congregation's life, and I pray that they will be used in your own life, and even in the life of your congregation.

Mark Dever, Washington DC
January 2008

1

FORGETFULNESS

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–9

Young people today think of Moby not as the first name of a whale, but as a multi-platinum-selling recording artist. He released his first album twenty-two years ago as a teenager and member of the band *The Vatican Commandos*. His best-selling album is his 1999 release called *Play*, which has sold over ten million copies so far. Born Richard Melville Hall in 1965 in Manhattan, he has always been known simply as Moby. He is a direct descendant of Herman Melville, the well-known author, whose most famous work was *Moby Dick*. Moby has achieved a great deal of success, and although most young people know Moby's connection to the author, many don't know that Moby is a self-confessed Christian. He says he became a Christian when he was about twenty years old, when a friend encouraged him to read the Gospels. He read them, and that's when, as Moby recounts it, he was converted.

I read an article about Moby provocatively titled, "The Two Sides of Moby: Why He Loves Jesus but Not the Church."¹ While that's not quite what Moby is quoted as saying in the article, the sentiment is common enough—and understandable enough. Jesus is a figure of intense interest and even admiration for millions. His stories and sayings still inhabit our

minds two thousand years after he taught on the other side of the globe. He published no books, founded no dynasty, led no army, and governed no nation, but his images and stories and teachings and followers have girdled the globe, presenting a message of a Savior who sacrifices himself out of love. And to most, this is *compellingly beautiful*.

Then there is the church. If you have grown up in a church, you have reasons to be disillusioned. The church seems like a boring topic for most and a duty reluctantly fulfilled for many. In stark contrast with many of the unforgettable sayings of Christ, we can't remember what we heard in most sermons ten minutes after we get home. People around the world aren't interested in our church; for that matter, people just around the corner aren't either! Churches have published books and fielded armies and ruled kings and even so, if you introduce the topic of the church, you'll often find it met with responses ranging from a mild disinterest to a real dislike.

We can understand why. Churches say they have the best and most important news in the world—they have the answer to our problems, they are God's embassies on earth—yet churches are made up of people like you and me, people who are grumpy, irritable, unfaithful, and selfish. We become too possessive of small things and too casual about great ones. We become too defensive for ourselves and ignore God. We talk of love, but we too often give ourselves over to hate—even in church.

In this book we are going to think about this topic of the church and her challenges, using Paul's first letter to the Corinthians as our framework. The epistle has a number of passages that are well known, such as chapter 13, the "love chapter," and chapter 15 about the resurrection. In working through this letter, we will be led into important passages on gender issues, spiritual gifts, lawsuits, and church discipline. Much of the letter is taken up with Paul addressing situations specific to the church in Corinth and answering questions put to him by some of the believers there.

God had used Paul to establish the church in Corinth during what we call his second missionary journey, which was also his first trip to Europe. Paul spent a year and a half there (likely in A.D. 50–51), working as a tent-maker or leather worker and preaching the good news about Jesus Christ. It was probably sometime a few years later during his two and a half years in Ephesus (between A.D. 52 and 55) that Paul wrote this letter.

Corinth was a major crossroads between the east and the west, between the southern portion of Greece and Athens and the northern parts of Greece. Ancient Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. A century later, in 29 B.C., Julius Caesar re-founded Corinth as a Roman colony. As a

great trading center with mobile populations, it retained a reputation for immorality. Religions from all over the empire flourished in Corinth along with the newly resettled populations.

The church Paul had established in Corinth was young, full of life, and just as full of problems. No other church in the New Testament had more problems nor such a variety, and at the time of Paul's epistle, it was threatened with destruction. Leadership was misunderstood, people were self-deceived, the church was ridden with partisanship, pride, pretentiousness, and immorality. False teachers, super-spirituality, asceticism, and loveless selfishness were rife—not unlike some churches today, not unlike some of the churches that Moby has run into, and not unlike some churches you may have run into.

So how can we learn from Paul's epistle to this troubled church? We want to start where Paul started:

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 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: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. (1 Corinthians 1:1–9)

In our consideration of these verses, I hope you will be encouraged to meditate on some of the good things that God has done in the life of every Christian and in our churches. I want to ask four questions that I hope will prove fruitful as we follow Paul's instructions, inspired by God's Holy Spirit, for the Corinthian Christians and for us, too.

Remember Your Blessings

The first question to consider is this: have you forgotten your blessings? The Corinthian Christians were famous for their faults, and Paul is going to deal with these clearly and at some length later in the letter. First, however, he

focuses on something positive—the work of God’s grace. Had the Corinthian believers received any blessings from God that Paul could point out? Paul usually began his letters with a form of thanksgiving, but if there was a church where he might not be able to do this, the church at Corinth would be it. With all of the problems evident there, Paul had just reason to skip his traditional opening, but he did not. When we need to speak critically about a church—ours or another—how often do we pause and first consider the evidences of God’s work there?

The first evidence of God’s work among the Corinthians is the fact that Paul himself was writing to them (v. 2). Christ’s apostle who had first preached the gospel to them was now writing to them. Christian, we too have God’s Word—the Bible. We don’t worship a picture or a statue or an idea. We worship a personal God who speaks and has spoken to us. Like these Corinthians, we are blessed people.

In fact, these Corinthians were *the church of God* as we see here in verse 2. Paul may have been the human instrument that founded this church, but he acknowledges—for their sakes and his—that its members belong to God. God looked at them, and he said, “These belong to me; they are mine. They are *of me*. I have a special concern and care for them, a special regard to their welfare.” And the same is true of us, friends. Whatever challenges we face in our churches, we are a church not owned by ourselves or by the pastor; we are the church of God. The church—our church—is his creation, his concern. Surely that reminds us of the importance of being in a church, not merely that we should attend one, but that we are part of a choice and privileged company. How great a blessing this is to us, to be a part of those people who are God’s special concern.

In verse 2 we also see the Corinthians described as those *sanctified in Christ Jesus*. Paul brings this to the forefront before he gets to other matters. They had been sanctified in Christ Jesus, declared and made holy in him. Grasping the reality of sanctification is crucial to putting things in perspective. God separates people from the world by putting them in Christ Jesus. We are declared to be holy and righteous because Christ’s holiness and righteousness are accounted to us. Friends, if you are Christians, you do not need to labor under condemnation. To do so is to ignore what God has done for you in Christ. Christians are sanctified in Christ Jesus, and in him they are being changed in their attitudes and actions, their loves and longings, to be more like him. This is true of you, my friends, if you are Christians.

We read in verse 2 that Christians are *called to be holy*. We are called to live lives that more fully reflect God’s character. Holiness is our responsi-

bility and our destiny. It is God's work in us, work to which we are called as co-laborers. What a blessing that is! Rather than being lost in sin—today and for eternity—we are called to be holy.

We see in verse 3 that Paul prayed for *grace and peace* for the Corinthians. This standard greeting was used by Paul here as a deeply Christian prayer for God's mercy and for wholeness and soundness, especially concerning the believers' walk with God. These things are the reality of a Christian's life, aren't they? For the Corinthians and for us, the Christian life is marked by God's grace and by peace with him. Whatever challenges we may face in our congregations, we realize that Christ died to save us, and in so doing he bore our penalty. As a result, God's wrath is turned from us and his favor has been poured out on us. So great are our blessings that we can almost say that the things over which we struggle and suffer pain are small in comparison.

I remember reading about the last days of the Puritan minister William Gouge. Those days were marked by physical pain, as death normally is. But Gouge had always had a firm grip upon the gospel. He wrote once, "When I look upon myself, I see nothing but emptiness and weakness; but when I look upon Christ, I see nothing but fulness and sufficiency."² As he became more aged, he became more infirm in body, but his faith was strong. Friends remembered: "When he could scarcely hold the cup at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, with his paralytic hand, while he carried it to his mouth; with a firm and fixed confidence he took hold of Christ, and with an holy and spiritual thirst, applied his blood to his soul."³ Toward the end of Gouge's life, one friend wrote of him:

In the most violent paroxysms, he said, "Well, yet in all these there is nothing of hell, or of God's wrath." His sufferings were never so deep, but he could see the bottom of them, and say, "Soul, be silent: soul, be patient. It is thy God and Father who thus ordereth thy condition. Thou art his clay, and he may tread and trample on thee as he pleaseth. Thou hast deserved much more. It is enough that thou art kept out of hell. Though thy pain be grievous, yet it is tolerable. Thy God affords some intermissions. He will turn it to thy good, and at length put an end to all: None of which things can be expected in hell." His afflictions greatly contributed to the exercise of his grace.⁴

We see in 1 Corinthians 1:4 that *Paul thanks God for the Corinthians*. If we were thinking in a secular way, the last thing in the world we could imagine is thanking God for them. The church had been full of problems ever since its founding, and as we go on in the letter we will see that there appeared to be some dissatisfaction in the church with Paul. Clearly a number of people

did not think much of him. Paul's influence was being diminished so that he was seen as merely one of several competing "parties" within the church. Some were saying of his teaching, "Well, that's just *Paul's* opinion!" But regardless of that, what does Paul do? He thanks God for them. Friends, all true Christians are grounds for thanksgiving. God's work in each Christian, and in each congregation of Christians, is grounds for thanksgiving, a triumph of his mercy over sin, a testimony of his grace never to be forgotten.

Here in verse 4 Paul also expands on the grace he has mentioned already. He reminds the Corinthians that they have received God's grace *in Christ Jesus*. Whatever challenges Christians face, then and now, we know ourselves to be recipients of God's amazing grace; but we still need to remind ourselves of it.

Then, in verse 5, Paul tells the Corinthians that they had *been enriched in Christ in every way*. He reminds them that they are not spiritually impoverished but have been made better and given wonderful treasures. That is true of today's Christians, as well. Paul shows the breadth of this in the phrase "in every way." The Corinthians had been enriched in all their speaking. In Christ, their words could be used to speak the truth about God and to build each other up.

Paul also reminds the Corinthians that they had been enriched in all their knowledge. Corinth was a place that valued status, and knowledge was considered to be a way to status. So Paul used that fact to appeal to the basis of their richest knowledge, that which they had received in Christ. In Christ they had come to find the purpose of their lives, the reason for their existence, and the way they could be forgiven of their sins and come to know God. What better knowledge is there? Whatever these Christians may have been struggling with, whatever questions they had outstanding, whatever uncertainties or errors, they had been enriched in Christ in every way by the gospel in all their speaking and knowledge.

So have we, if we are Christians. We do not have to squander our words, uttering things that are unloving and untrue, words that are pointless or useless. The most important problems in the universe, and in our own lives, have been solved for us through the gospel. Do you think of yourself as having been enriched in every way? You have been in Christ. What peace or comfort can anyone lack who is in covenant with the Father of mercies?

But there is more still. We see in verse 6 that the testimony about Christ was confirmed in them. The Corinthians had become evidence of the truth of Paul's message. The Christian is living proof of the gospel. This church had become convinced of and had begun to experience and then to display

the reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What a privilege this was for them and for us, too. Our lives reflect the truth of the message about Christ. We become filled with his image rather than our own, and in so doing our lives confirm gospel claims. Again, what a privilege to be so used by God in such a great task.

In fact, the Corinthians had been so enriched by Christ that Paul says in verse 7 that they didn't lack any spiritual gift. They lacked nothing that God could give them. We have all that we need for what God has called us to. As Christians we lack nothing we need to be built up in the Lord that he has not and will not supply. This is astounding. If you are anything like me, you are probably prone to think that you could do this or that if only you had this gift or that circumstance. But what we find here is that there is no spiritual gift that we lack as Christians. Since God has given us his only Son, how will he not with him give us everything that we need for life and godliness?

The Corinthian Christians, for all their problems, had an eager expectancy about them for the right thing. Paul comments on the fact that they eagerly wait for the revelation of Christ (v. 7). They had been given a sense of anticipation and, unlike our world's cruel counterfeits, this was an anticipation that would be met. Christians, here is yet another gift God has given you. How many times have you known disappointment when some cherished hope has been dashed, some eagerly anticipated moment taken from you? No matter! As Christians, we have been given an ultimate hope that will surely come to pass. This is a gift—a great gift.

In verse 8 there is a wonderful promise: believers will be kept strong to the end by Christ. These Corinthian Christians could be sure of divine strengthening to keep them going till the battle is won, till the race is over, till the job is done, till they have made it home. That is true for us, too, friends. If we are Christians, we have been given this great gift; we will persevere. I imagine that you sometimes feel weak. You wonder what is going to happen. Here we see an encouragement to realize that your well-being is in hands better and more powerful than your own.

Paul also reminds them that they would be blameless on the day of Christ (v. 8). When we read this letter, we find that the Corinthian church was full of people who were involved in various kinds of sin. But Paul assured them that "on the day of Christ" there will be nothing to lay against the Christian. We will be blameless. Not "merely" blameless, as one paraphrase puts it, not simply without "a guilty feeling"; we will not be reckoned guilty at all. There is something worse than feelings of self-condemnation, and that

is condemnation by Almighty God. Guilt before God is real, and it is this guilt that Christians will be without on that final day of judgment.

Paul sums up their blessings in verse 9, telling the Corinthians that they had been called by God into fellowship with Christ. This is the state of a Christian. Where we once were at enmity with God, we have now been brought into a relationship with Christ. We have been and are being formed into a community with Christ. In giving us Christ, God has given us the best he could. As Paul later writes to the Christians in Rome, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

Have you forgotten your blessings? Remember the blessings God has given you. There is a reason that Christians have sometimes been called simply “the blessed.”

Who Has Blessed You?

The second question to consider as you meditate on this opening passage in 1 Corinthians is, have you forgotten who has blessed you? We must remember who has blessed us! We are helped by this person and that one. Someone gives us a gift. Another encourages us. Our birthdays are celebrated by family and friends. But in this passage we are reminded that the one who blesses us is God. It was God who willed Paul to be an apostle (v. 1) in the first place. So for us, friends, all the blessings enumerated in this chapter have come to us through God. We have this letter of Paul, and indeed all the Bible, only because of God. Behind all the blessings the Corinthians had been given through Paul was God. Paul was a conduit of these great blessings to the Corinthians, but it was God who had turned Paul from his sins, God who had called him to be an apostle, and God who had sent Paul to Europe.

Who were the apostles? They were those who through God’s revelation and inspiration were authorized to speak for, to testify about, and to interpret the truth about God, and especially about Jesus Christ his Son. The apostles’ authority—given by Christ himself—was final. We cannot appeal to some other authority and still call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, because God has made his will known through the apostles. The apostles were given to the church by God.

Likewise, it is God who owns the assembly in Corinth (v. 2). The church belonged to God. The church was the creation of God and was owned by him. It was not Paul’s church. It was God’s. So Paul recognized in the

Corinthians—troubled as they were—that they were the special possession of God. God has become their father, as we see in verse 3, and he dispenses grace and peace. Grace and peace come from God, our Father. The blessing is from him and draws our minds back to him.

Paul, of course, recognizes that all of these blessings stand as tokens of God's love. So it is God who is always thanked by Paul (v. 4). He knows that God is the source of all these blessings. There is nothing good that Paul sees in the Corinthians that is not justly attributed to God himself. There is no spread of the gospel or growth of the church in Corinth that does not immediately draw Paul's mind back to God. When we read about the establishment of the church in Corinth (Acts 18), we find that Paul was discouraged and apparently preparing to leave it behind. But then we read in Acts 18:9–10, "One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.'" Paul knew that God was behind calling and blessing these people.

The grace that was given to the Corinthians in Christ Jesus (v. 4) was from God. It wasn't Paul against whom the Corinthians had sinned. It wasn't Paul who needed to extend grace to them. It was God against whom the Corinthians had sinned. If anyone's grace was needed, it was God's, and it was God's grace they received. The gospel holds out *God's* grace! Surely we understand that of our own lives as well. We thank God, because God is the source of our blessings.

We also see here that God is faithful (v. 9). God is not only our Creator and Father and gracious and peaceful—as if those blessings were not enough. God is also faithful. In the Greek language that Paul used, the wording more clearly reads "faithful is God," as if to stress the point. Paul considers this faithfulness particularly in connection with God's having called the Corinthians into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. This great call—like Paul's own—had come from God. God was the one blessing and calling the Corinthians, and every blessing was to turn their minds and hearts back to him in thanksgiving and humility and joy and confidence. They were to remember that they were blessed and that God was the source of the blessings.

It is the same with Christians today. Our faith traces back from our blessings to the giver of them. All of the blessings we have been considering—wonderful though they are—draw our attention to the One who gives them, and so we praise God and thank him for his goodness. So our confidence is placed in him, our trust in him is excited, our reliance on him encouraged.

Have you forgotten *who* has blessed you? Remember who has blessed you—it is God! Remember that, my forgetful friends, and see what implications remembering might have for you today.

How Has God Blessed You?

The third question is this: have you forgotten how God has blessed you? God gave some of his blessings to the Corinthians through creation. Other blessings he gave through the ministry of Paul and other preachers among them, but throughout these verses Paul constantly points the Corinthians to the one through whom they had been supremely blessed—Jesus Christ.

It was the risen Christ who appeared to Paul and called him as an apostle (v. 1). The risen Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and called him to himself and to be his apostle, and it was in Christ that the Corinthians had been sanctified (v. 2). Christ by his work declared the Corinthians holy, and he made them so.

In fact, again and again in this passage Jesus is called Lord (see vv. 2–3, 7–9). That Jesus Christ is Lord is the most widespread confession in these early verses of the letter. He is prayed to (v. 2). Consider that: Jesus Christ is legitimately prayed to. Most especially, Jesus Christ is the means of God's grace to the Corinthians (v. 4). How could a holy and righteous God love sinners? The answer is found in Jesus Christ. He is the one who, by his perfect life and substitutionary death, has merited and supplied God's grace to Christians. That is why we read that in him—in Christ—the Corinthians were enriched in every way (v. 5). It is only in and through Jesus Christ that Christians receive all God's blessings. Outside of Christ, God is our fearsome judge. He pursues us in his righteous claims over us. But our reconciliation to him, the great good news, comes only through Christ.

This is why Paul says in verse 6 that Jesus Christ was the one testified about to them. Who else would Paul tell them about? In what other name could Paul hold out to them such hope? Jesus Christ was the center of Paul's preaching, echoing what Peter once asked Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68–69).

So it is Jesus Christ whose revelation is eagerly awaited (v. 7). The Christian hope for the future is focused on Jesus Christ and upon his return. It is Jesus Christ who would keep the Corinthians strong to the end (v. 8). It is Christ who perseveres with believers and causes them to persevere with

him till death. The final day is referred to as *his* day (v. 8). That's because Christ is our final judge. It is in Christ that we are accepted. Whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are holding a dress rehearsal of that final day. It is into fellowship with Christ that we have been called into fellowship by God (v. 9). Richard Sibbes said:

We may know our trust in the name of the Lord,
 being now conceived as a gracious Father in Christ,
 clothed with the relation of a father:
 for so we must trust him,
 not God absolutely,
 for there is no comfort in an absolute God,
 distinct from his relations;
 but when we apprehend him in relation as a sweet Father in Christ,
 in that name,
 then the nature of God is lovely to us,
 between whom and us there was an infinite distance before.
 Now Christ being Immanuel, God with us, has brought God and us
 together.⁵

Our sharing in Christ is God's fundamental blessing to Christians.

We must not fail to notice how Paul refers to Jesus in verse 9—as God's Son. Many of us know the famous first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter catechism: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." But nearly a century before the Westminster Assembly produced their famous catechism, the German reformer Ursinus produced the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) with an initial question and answer no less worthy of being known:

Question: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

Answer: That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul—in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and

makes me whole-heartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Oh, my brothers and sisters, have you forgotten *how* God has blessed you? Remember how God has blessed you! He has blessed you—through Jesus Christ.

Have Others Forgotten Their Blessings?

The fourth and final question is this: have Christians around you forgotten their blessings? We must help other Christians remember the blessings of God. Consider the ministry of Paul. Certainly he was called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God (v. 1). Paul had a unique ministry, and he expresses this fact to the Christians to whom he writes. He uses his apostolic title at the beginning of 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy. Paul had been set apart by Christ to preach the gospel throughout the whole world. But in these letters Paul was concerned not simply to plant the gospel among them but also to help them with various issues in the church. He wrote to them to instruct and correct them, but we must not overlook the fact that Paul first identified the evident marks of God's grace among them. Primarily, Paul wrote to these believers in order to help them remember God's blessings in their lives and to help them work out the implications of them.

As we see in verse 2, Paul calls on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is what marks out Christians—recognizing Christ as God and praying to him. Even apostles needed a savior. This was the man called Saul who had approved of the death of the first Christian martyr and had been active in imprisoning many other Christians. What an unlikely convert he was! But because of his past, he was a walking encouragement to other Christians, even before he said a word.

Do you see yourself as an unlikely convert? Paul was an unlikely convert, and when he was in Corinth, he saw some converts we might think unlikely. We read in Acts 18:8, "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized." When a frustrated mob was unable to get Paul successfully convicted and dealt with by Roman officials, "they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court" (Acts 18:17). Crispus's successor in overseeing the synagogue, Sosthenes, became

the focus of their frustrated anger. Whatever happened to him? “Paul . . . and our brother Sosthenes” (1 Cor. 1:1). It appears that he, too, was converted. Two consecutive synagogue rulers were converted in Corinth.

David Prior tells of what he calls “a parallel situation . . . at Oxford University in the early 1960s during the heyday of the Humanist Society. Its president was converted to Christ, which led to an extraordinary general meeting of the Society. The person then elected was himself converted within a few weeks, thus necessitating another extraordinary general meeting.”⁶ My friend, how impossible is it for you to consider calling on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ?

As remarkable as any of this, a nice summation of it all is found in verse 4. Paul thanks God for the Corinthians. What is the first thing that Paul said he did for these confused Christians? Did he say that he regretted ever making their acquaintance, or question their salvation, or warn others about them? He said none of these things. He thanked God for them. He understood that all of their particular sins and struggles were simply rearguard actions of the evil one in retreat. Important as some of these sins were—vivid in their ignorance, even more vivid in their defiance—they paled before God’s saving grace in their lives. And so Paul begins with these people whom he must correct carefully and at points passionately by putting it all in perspective and thanking God for them, and even telling them that he was thanking God for them.

It is always wise to begin by noticing evidences of God’s work in someone you must correct, even if there are other issues looming larger in your mind. Pausing to remind another, and yourself, of God’s grace will make it easier for the erring one to hear the corrective words that you want to say, and it will also help you to have a more accurate perspective as you begin to discuss the need for correction. If you cannot see the evidences of God’s grace in the one who needs correction, you may have a log in your eye, in which case maybe you should wait to speak about the other’s speck until you can see the evidences of God’s work in your brother or sister. My friends, if the one in error is a believer, God has purchased him or her, and his Spirit is at work there. If you cannot see that, you are failing to see the most important thing about that person.

We are not called to the same apostolic ministry as Paul was. But we can work to help others around us to notice and remember evidences of God’s grace in their lives. Doing so will make us more loving and careful and observant and joyful and useful. It will help to make others more thankful

and encouraged and godly and pliable and confident. And it will bring glory to God.

We refer to some people, some days or events or things, as unforgettable. I wonder what in your life you have considered unforgettable? Memory can be erased by the rush of events, by the passage of time, by the loss of interest. Christian, do you remember God's blessings in your life? Can you? Will you? Will you help others around you to do so as well? It might be the best thing you can do to help them—and yourself. Forgetfulness of God's grace is one of the greatest tools in the enemy's war against our souls.

Pray that God would help you get to know others, to care for them, to be observant of their lives, and to be kind to them. Help them to carry their burdens and sorrows by reminding them of God's good work in their life. Help to give them heart for the fight that we are called to in this life. That is how Paul begins this letter, and it would not be a bad thing for you to begin doing the same in others' lives today. Call to their attention evidences of God's grace for their good and for God's glory. Answer God's repeated call in Scripture to remember.

“As a leading voice for reformation in the twenty-first century, Mark Dever calls evangelicals to love the church as much as we love Jesus. In this exposition of I Corinthians he gives clear pastoral guidance for the difficult problems addressed in a difficult book of the Bible, confronting not only the controversial issues that always face the church, but also the spiritual dangers that lurk behind them.”

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