**GOSPEL FOUNDATIONS**

**SEEING AND SHARING GOD’S GRACE**

**1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

**INTRODUCTION**

A couple months ago we started a sermon series called “Gospel Foundations”. The purpose of this series is to highlight how we at Sovereign Grace are striving to be a gospel-centered church, not just in word, but in deed. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:11 that “no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” Who Jesus is, and what Jesus has done in his death and resurrection, must serve as the foundation of what we believe, and what we do, if we are to be a healthy church.

After putting that series on pause to directly address COVID-19, our leadership has decided that it’s time to get back to this series on Gospel Foundations and to re-discovering, and to some extent re-laying, a gospel-centered foundation in our church. We’re going to get back to the business of studying and applying what it looks like to not only read the gospel on paper, but to live the gospel in practice.

Pastor Tim started this last Sunday when he addressed the topic of humility. When I first started attending our church twelve years ago, one of the first things that struck me about the people here was their evident humility. These were people who didn’t think much of themselves, not in the sense that they putting themselves down, but in the sense that they were building others up. C.S. Lewis said that “humility is not thinking less of yourself; it’s thinking of yourself less”. That was true of so many people I met here.

I thought this was just a happy coincidence, and that Sovereign Grace was just the kind of place that attracted humble people. But now I realize that the culture of humility was being intentionally cultivated. It was being taught behind the pulpit, and it was being modelled in practice.

There’s a reason why the Bible calls us to “humble ourselves”. “Humble” isn’t just an adjective. It’s a verb. It’s something we can do. We don’t just wait for humility to drop from the sky. We can actively engage our will and our mind so that, by the grace of God, we can humble ourselves and actually become humble people.

Today we’re going to focus on one of the things that we can do to become humble people. This is a practice that both results in humility, and is the result of humility. It comes out of humility, and it produces humility at the same time.

I’m talking about a practice that we call “sharing evidences of grace”. This is simply telling someone how you see God working in their lives. It’s identifying God’s grace in another person’s life, and sharing about that grace with that person in order to encourage them and build them up. It’s using our words to help people see what can be so hard for them to see themselves.

Like many of you, I didn’t grow up in a culture that did anything close to this. Chinese culture is very reserved when it comes to encouragement. We’ll often hear about what we can do better, but we won’t often hear about what we’re already doing well. Encouragement is a rare commodity, and that’s true not just in certain cultures, but in general. People in general don’t know how to use their words to build people up. We know how to use our words to challenge, to correct, and to hurt, but when it comes to encouragement, we don’t have much to say.

Encouragement is a rare commodity, and that’s one of the reasons why it’s so precious. Every day we hear lots of words, but rarely are those words directed to our encouragement. Encouragement is both rare and precious, so that when we finally receive it, it’s like a ray of sunshine on a gloomy day. It lifts us up and completely changes our perspective.

The Apostle Paul models this in most of his letters. If you read his letters, you’ll notice that he almost always begins with thanksgiving and encouragement. What’s striking about this is that most of these churches weren’t doing very well. Some were drifting in doctrine. Others were drifting in morality.

The Corinthian church was drifting in both. Doctrinally, you had people denying the reality of the resurrection. You had people who wanted more philosophy and less gospel. You had people who were drifting from the very foundations of the church. And on the moral side, you had all kinds of issues. Some celebrated the fact that a man could sleep with his step mother. Others taught that all sex was evil. Neither of them were right. Some believers were so caught up in their conflicts with one another that they were suing one another in secular courts. Others were showing up drunk to the Lord’s Supper. This was a dysfunctional church. It was barely working, and it was in danger of collapsing altogether.

And yet, despite all these concerns, Paul was able to begin his letter with encouragement. And it wasn’t just Paul remembering the good old days, or complimenting them for their numerical growth. He was highlighting the grace of God in their lives. He saw how God was at work, and that led him to think about them with thanksgiving. Or as he wrote in verse 4, “I give thanks to my God always for you”.

How was that possible? And how can we become the kinds of people who can give thanks to God for the grace of God in others, including those who are struggling? That’s what we’re going to answer in our sermon today.

The title of this sermon is **Seeing and Sharing God’s Grace**.

Our text reveals that there were three reasons why Paul was able to see God’s grace in the Corinthian church, share God’s grace with the Corinthian church, and give thanks to God for the Corinthian church. These three reasons will serve as our three points today:

1. Who They Were
2. Who They Are
3. Who They Will Be

(1) **WHO THEY WERE**

Paul begins his letter by reminding both himself, and the Corinthians, of who they were. In verse 1, Paul says that he was “called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus”. Paul never forgot why he was who he was, and why he did what he did. He was an apostle, a servant of the church and a herald of the gospel, not because he got the right education, or got the right degrees, or went to the right seminary, but because he received the right calling. God was the one who called him to be an apostle, and that was the only reason why he served as one.

Paul then explains that he’s not the only one who was called. The members of the Corinthian church were called as well. In fact, every single person who has repented of their sins and professes faith in Christ has been called by God. And so, he addresses the Corinthians in verse 2 as those who were “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”.

This calling in verse 2 is different than the calling in verse 1. Verse 1 is talking about the call of the apostle. Verse 2 is talking about the call of the Christian. Not every Christian has the calling in verse 1, but every Christian has the calling in verse 2. Everyone in every place who calls upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ has been called “to be saints”. What does this mean?

The Apostle Paul uses the word “saints” forty times in his letters, and every time, he’s referring to Christians in general. Not elite Christians; not dead Christians; but living, still-sinning Christians. The word “saints” literally means “holy ones”, those who are set apart for God. Yes, we are to become holy as we grow in Christ-likeness, but on another level, we’ve already been made holy by grace.

Paul explains how that came about in verse 2 when he says “to those sanctified in Christ Jesus”. “Sanctified” means to be “made holy”. This can refer to the gradual process of sanctification, but it can also refer to the one-time event of God setting us apart for himself and making us holy. That’s the sense that’s meant here. When we turn to Christ, we are joined to Christ by faith and made holy by virtue of our union with him. We are “sanctified in Christ Jesus”.

Jerry Bridges puts it this way:

“Sainthood is not a spiritual attainment, or even a recognition of such attainment. It is rather a state or status into which God brings every believer. All Christians are saints.”

All Christians are called to be saints, not as a future title to be earned, but as a present grace to be received. In Christ Jesus, we have already been made holy, and that means that we are to see one another as saints, as God's holy ones.

But who is doing the calling? Paul explains in verse 9: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” God called Paul to be an apostle in verse 1, and God calls every Christian to be saints in verse 2. In other words, we didn’t make ourselves saints. We didn’t set ourselves apart for God. God set us apart for himself. He was the one who called us into fellowship with Jesus and gave us the status of being holy in Jesus. By his grace, God has drawn us into sainthood, a Holy God making a Holy People in his Holy Son.

This gives us a crucial insight into Paul’s thinking, and into what enabled him to give thanks to God even for this dysfunctional church. He remembered that they were called to be saints. He remembered that God set his gaze upon every believer in that church and called them out of darkness and into his marvelous light. He remembered that they were made holy by the Holy Son of God.

In other words, Paul had learned how to look at people through the lens of the cross. Pastor Tim calls this looking at people “cross-eyed”. This is the skill of learning to look beyond who people are now with all their weaknesses, and sins, and failures, to who they’ve become in Christ. It’s looking beyond the sinner and seeing the saint, not because of what they’ve done, but because of what God has done for them in Christ.

This isn’t easy. In fact, it may feel nearly impossible, because we’re so accustomed to judging people on what we’ve seen in their lives, in the past, and in the present. Sometimes there’s just too much water under the bridge in some of our relationships, and gratitude is the last thing that comes to mind when we think of those people. But that’s walking by sight. Christians are called to walk by faith, to see the unseen realities of who people are in Christ.

Seeing people as called by God, as sanctified in Christ, as chosen and precious in the sight of God is an act of faith. We may not see it very often, but neither did Paul, and yet he was able to walk by faith and remember who the Corinthians truly were.

If we are to express gratitude for the sinners in our lives, we must remember who they were: they were called by God to be saints. And when we do, we can say with Psalm 16:3:

“As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.”

(2) **WHO THEY ARE**

That’s the first strategy in learning to give thanks even for those it’s hard to be thankful for. Remember who they were. The second is to remember who they are, which leads to our second point.

Paul turns his attention from the past to the present in verse 4 when he writes, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus”. Now we know that grace was given to the Corinthians when they were called, but Paul’s referring to a different grace here in verse 4. We know that because of what he says in verse 5. According to Paul, the grace of God in verse 4 had the effect of enriching the Corinthian believers in “all speech and all knowledge”.

Paul’s highlighting a unique characteristic of the Corinthian believers. According to Paul, the Corinthians excelled when it came to speech and knowledge. They were scholars and orators. They loved to study, and they loved to speak about what they were studying. They were educated, and they were eloquent.

If you read on, you’ll actually discover that this wasn’t always a good thing. In fact, their passion for knowledge was tempting them to abandon the gospel. Their thirst for knowledge led them to want something beyond the gospel, something novel and exciting, something that would keep them on the cutting edge of contemporary philosophy. That of course led Paul to remind them that the cross is foolishness to the unbelieving world. Always has been, always will be. It’s never going to be impressive in the blinded eyes of skeptics. But if God opened their eyes, the cross would be revealed as both the power and wisdom of God.

Their devotion to eloquent speech was also leading them astray because it was dividing them into different camps. Some of them said they followed Apollos, who was a leader in the early church; others said they followed Paul; others said they followed Peter; the “truly pious” said they followed Jesus. The reason for their division wasn’t that these leaders were teaching different things. It was because they were teaching with different styles. And because they exalted the style over the substance, their community was breaking apart.

The Corinthians excelled in speech and knowledge, but rather than lead them to maturity, it led them to immaturity instead. They were starting to believe that the mark of Christian maturity was the degree of one’s giftings rather than the degree of one’s love. This is why Paul had to rebuke them in 1 Corinthians 8:1:

“This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up.”

And this is what prompted Paul to write 1 Corinthians 13, the most beautiful chapter on love in the New Testament. In verses 1-2 he wrote:

If I **speak** in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all **knowledge**, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Speech and knowledge are nothing without love, and it seems that the Corinthians had missed this. But the amazing thing is that this didn’t stop Paul from identifying their gifts of speech and knowledge as evidences of God’s grace.

He says in verse 4 that the reason why he always give thanks to God for them is because of the *grace* of God that was given to them in Christ Jesus. And what was that grace? In verse 5 he says that it was their speech and knowledge. Paul celebrated their speech and knowledge. He gave thanks to God because of their speech and knowledge. In verse 6 he actually says that their speech and knowledge were the result of their faith in the testimony about Christ – that is, the gospel – so that they weren’t lacking in any gift as they wait for the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In other words, Paul was able to look beyond the abuses of the gifts and see the gifts themselves. And when he saw the gifts themselves, he saw them as evidences of God’s grace, and that made him thankful. He was thankful that the Lord had given them these gifts despite how they were being misused, and he didn’t hesitate to share this with the Corinthians.

It’s not hard to think of how this might apply today. Most of us here would call ourselves Reformed. We’re people who take doctrine seriously. More specifically, we take the doctrine of God’s sovereignty seriously. Did you know that people who are outside the Reformed world have a name for us? They call us the “Frozen Chosen”, because they say that we care a lot about doctrine but not a lot about people.

I don’t believe that’s true of us, but let’s say for a moment that it is. What Paul has done for us is he has modelled how critics of the Reformed world should respond to us. He’s showing them that they need to learn how to look beyond what they see as an abuse of a gift, and see the gift itself. And in the Reformed world, the gift is a passionate pursuit and protection of sound doctrine. That’s a wonderful thing, because doctrine reveals truth, and the truth reveals God. Preserving sound doctrine is preserving the knowledge of God himself.

Let’s consider ourselves for a moment. We in the Reformed world might look at the world of charismatic Christianity and scoff at how they jump around and speak in tongues in the corporate assembly, and we say, “1 Corinthians 14:33! God is not a God of confusion but of peace!” And that’s true. But can we not look beyond the abuses and see God’s grace, grace that has enriched them in passion and devotion to Jesus?

Husbands, you may complain that your wife gives you a “honey do” list on your day off. But can you not look beyond that and admire how God has given your wife the gift of administration and organization? Parents, you may shake your head at how much time your children spend on social media. But can you not look that and give thanks for how much they care for their friends?

This doesn’t mean that we ignore the abuses or that we refrain from offering correction. Not at all. Paul may have been looking at people cross-eyed, but he wasn’t wearing rose-coloured glasses. He didn’t ignore the abuses. He addressed them head on. That’s what the rest of the letter is about. But before he offered his correction, he made sure to see the grace of God that lay beyond the abuses, to express thanksgiving for that grace, and then to share the evidences of God’s grace with the Corinthians.

(3) **WHO THEY WILL BE**

We learn to be grateful for others by seeing God’s grace in who they were, and who they are. But we must also consider who they will be, which leads to our final point.

As Paul considers the Corinthian church, with all their dysfunction and division, his mind inevitably turns to the future in verse 8. He considers the day when they stand together side by side on the great Day of Judgment, and on that day, they won’t face a recounting of all their dysfunction and division. They won’t be pronounced guilty and sent away to serve an eternal sentence. They will stand *guiltless* before the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul knows that they may be guilty of many things now, but the day is coming when none of it will matter. Everyone who is in Christ by faith will stand guiltless before the great and awesome Judge.

How? Because the Judge stepped down from his dais and became our Saviour. Jesus will judge us guiltless because he was judged guilty for us. On the cross, Jesus was condemned to death, not because of his guilt, but because of ours. On the cross, the innocent one was declared guilty, so that guilty ones could be declared innocent.

Paul knew that this was true, not just for himself, but for everyone who has been called by God into fellowship with Jesus Christ our Lord. That’s why his hope for the Corinthians wasn’t bound up in this world. His hope for them didn’t rest on the day when they received his letter and took his advice and started reforming the church. His ultimate hope was in the great and final day when they were received into God’s presence and declared completely and utterly *guiltless*.

This is what everyone who puts their trust in Jesus gets to look forward to. We are all guilty of many things. We’ve all committed great sins, and that only refers to the sins we know of. There are countless sins we’ve committed in our minds and hearts that we don’t even recall. Our hands are stained with guilt and shame. But if you turn to Jesus, if you repent of your sins and put your trust in him, he washes all the guilt away, because on the cross, he took all that guilt upon himself in order to make us guiltless before him.

Paul was able to express gratitude for the Corinthians not only because of who they were, or who they are, but who they will be. They will be declared guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. And he was confident that they would reach that day because the God who began the work in them would bring it to completion. So he says in verse 8 that God will sustain them to the end, and he highlights the faithfulness of God in verse 9.

God is faithful. He finishes what he begins. He is the author and the perfecter of our faith. The One who called us to himself will also bring us before his holy throne where we will finally be declared guiltless.

**CONCLUSION**

So where do we start? How do we start practicing this spiritual discipline of sharing evidences of grace with others?

To begin with, you need to know what to look for. Sharing evidences of grace isn’t just talking about what you like about a person. It’s identifying areas of spiritual growth in the lives of those around you. It’s helping people see God’s hand in their lives, shaping and molding them into faithful followers of Jesus.

You could begin with the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. Go through the fruits of the Spirit and spend some time thinking about who displays these fruits in their lives. It could be one person. It could be multiple people. It doesn’t really matter. Once you’ve identified these evidences of grace in people’s lives, go and share about it with them.

Or you could turn to the gifts of the Spirit, like in Romans 12:6-8 (prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, generosity, mercy).

It could be the elements of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful, etc.)

Or it could be a more general category. Our friend Steve Bice, the pastor of our sister church in Dayton Ohio compiled this list:

* Belief in the Gospel
* Walking by Faith
* Confession of Sin
* Mortification of Sin
* Obedience to God
* Resisting Worldliness
* Pursuit of Biblical Fellowship

There are so many places you could start. That won’t be the hard part. The hard part will be spending the time to think about it, and share about it.

The reality is that we spend very little time thinking about others because we’re spending too much time thinking about ourselves. Or when we do think about others, it’s usually about how they’re disappointing us, or how they’ve hurt us.

That’s why sharing evidences of grace takes humility, because it’s the humble person who considers others as more significant than himself.

If we are to continue growing as a church that is built on a gospel foundation, then sharing evidences of grace will go a long way in helping us. But it begins in the heart. It begins with how we see ourselves, and it begins with how we see others. We must learn to see people as called, gifted, and guiltless before God because of Christ if we are to become the kinds of people who celebrate and share God’s grace in the lives of others.

No one has written and spoken more about sharing evidences of grace than C.J. Mahaney, the founder of our family of churches, and so I close with these words from C.J.:

“Most people are more aware of the absence of God than the presence of God. Most people are more aware of the presence of sin than evidences of grace. What a privilege and joy it is…to turn one’s attention to ways in which God is at work, because so often people are unaware of God’s work.

So…I want to interact with everybody by identifying an evidence of grace, because if they are Christian I know God is at work in their lives. What a joy it is to discern where and how God is at work, draw people’s attention to it, and celebrate God’s grace in their lives! The fact that we get to do this—how cool is this?” – C.J. Mahaney