

# Identifying Evidences of Grace<sup>\*</sup>

Series: The Power of Words and the Grace of God  
1 Corinthians 1:1-9  
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## Sermon Outline

### I. Introduction

- Today's topic: affirming evidences of God's grace that you see in others.
- *Evidences of grace* -- are simply ways that we observe God's grace at work in the lives of the people that God has placed in our lives.
- Illustration: "negadelphia"
- Sadly -- in the church (not referring to this local church) -- BUT the church universal or the church in general -- isn't much different than Philadelphia sports fans when it comes to how we relate to other believers. At times, we can be "nega-believers" if you will -- overly negative and critical when speaking of family members, fellow-believers churches and pastors. Often our first impulse is to bring a negative evaluation about someone, rather than to identify and to affirm God's grace at work.
- The Apostle Paul was different. It seems that Paul cultivated a habit of identifying evidences of grace in people's lives, even believers who were messing up very badly.

### II. Paul's Example

- In order for us to appreciate Paul's example in this passage of discerning and pointing out evidences of grace, we must first understand that Paul had many reasons to be negative about this church. Put it this way: if you or I sat down to write the opening sentences of this letter, I don't think we'd start off on a positive note.
- Some of the problems:

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\* Note: the outline and many of the insights from this sermon come straight from chapter 8 of CJ Mahaney's chapter on Evidences of Grace in his excellent book "*Humility*."

- People grouped into cliques based on which leader they most liked and identified with.
  - They exercised spiritual gifts as a show of spirituality, rather than as a way to edify others.
  - There was also sexual immorality – of a particularly grievous sort -- going on that members and church leaders tolerated..
  - Their was also a certain social snobbery – where during the meal that took place where the Christians would also take the Lord’s Supper, people refused to share. Some of the Christians – were even getting intoxicated during this meal.
- So just think about this for a moment, “if you’re Paul, you’re sitting down to write a letter to this church -- how will you start?—how will you begin?”
  - Well, I certainly know how I would likely have begun. – with a rebuke! – something like -- “What is going on here?!” -- “You call yourselves a church?” – “Haven’t I taught you to live differently than this?!” -- “And who do you think you are, to live this way?!—in whatever way that you please?!” Do you think you’re spiritual people because you speak in tongues?
  - In contrast – most unexpectedly, Paul begins this letter with these words: chapter 1 verse 4 -- “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you....”
  - I wouldn’t begin this way, but why?

## II. Blinded By Pride

Well the reason is pride. As CJ insightfully observes,

“...only those who are humble can consistently identify evidences of grace in others who need adjustment. - *C.J. Mahaney*

- Now what does CJ mean by that?
- Well it gets back to something that we talked about last week, but it bears repeating. Paul viewed himself – and not others – the believers in Corinth or anyone else -- as the greatest sinner that he knew. That’s what he is getting at 1 Timothy 1:15 when he says:

“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”  
- *The Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:15)*

- Paul didn't have a problem with a low self-esteem or self-image when he wrote that verse. He simply was more intimately aware of his own sin, than anyone else's.
- If I were make of column listing as many of my sins as I can recall, and next to it I were make a column listing as many of your sins that I can recall, the list under my name would be immeasurably longer. It would take me a lifetime to recount all my own sins, but just minutes to recount yours. In this respect, I am the greatest sinner I know. Paul seems to think this way.
- This enabled Paul to see grace in the Corinthians – because he wasn't blinded by feelings of superiority -- or a sense that he -- an apostle of the ascended Christ (of all people) -- somehow deserved to not be troubled by such a problematic church. But instead, Paul saw himself as the greatest sinner that he knew. When he thinks of the cross, his mind first goes to his list and not the list of others and this enabled him to first see God's grace before he saw sin in the Corinthians.
- So how about you?
  - Like Paul, do you first see grace and not sin in other people?
  - Are you and not someone else the greatest sinner that you know?
  - Aren't you more intimately familiar with your sinful ways than with the sinful ways of others?
- If you have difficulty viewing others in a positive light – if you have difficulty identifying evidences of grace –the problem might have less to do with the sins of others, and more to do with pride in your own heart – blinding you to how much you yourself have been forgiven -- blinding you to the innumerable evidences God's work in the lives of those around you.

“Indeed, his[Paul's] ability to give thanks for these Christians probably says much about his own character...In every redeemed person there is evidence of the grace of God, and that brings forth Paul's gratitude, both to God and for them. To delight in God for his working in the lives of others, even in the lives of those with whom one feels compelled to disagree, *is sure evidence of one's own awareness of being the recipient of God's mercies.*” – Gordon Fee

- Now many of us, at this point are likely thinking something like: “I see how at times I don't view people through the lens of grace” and we want to know.... “**How** did Paul gain this perspective of people? Or another way to ask the question is...

### III. What Shapes Paul's Perspective of the Corinthians?

1) *His knowledge that they are called (1:2, 9).*

- Do you struggle do affirm and celebrate grace in the believers you know? If so, know this: sin doesn't ultimately define your brother or your sister – but rather, the fact that they have been individually and specifically called by God! – and the call of God of course being that moment in time when God's Spirit summoned us, regenerated our hearts, and enabled us to believe the Gospel.
- In a fallen world, sin is everywhere. You don't have to work hard to find it. If you want to find sin in someone, you just have to open your eyes and pay attention. This is why critical eyes find plenty of material to work with - Because There is no absence of remaining sin in any one of us.
- Critical people, which we all are at different points, when they observe sin or failure in someone else or somehow feel the effects of someone else's sin, they latch onto that sin and they see little else in that person's life. The tragic result is that grace, even where abundantly evident, can scarcely be appreciated or affirmed in speech.
- To relate to people primarily in light of their past or even present sins and failures flies in the face of the believer's true identity . The person you incessantly criticize is on who has, from the foundation of the world, been chosen by God, one who has been graciously called by God Himself to be his own.
- To cultivate a habitually critical heart towards someone is dangerous relationship-destroying stuff.

2) *His knowledge that God is at work*

- We've been talking about how in this passage, Paul draws his readers' attention to evidences of grace. Another way to put it is to say He draws their attention to ways that God is at work in their lives.
- In verse 4, Paul speaks of the grace that was given them in Jesus Christ and then in verse 5, he talks about how that grace was displayed – in the form of speech and all knowledge – speech and knowledge here likely referring to the gifts of utterance such as knowledge, wisdom, tongues and prophecy that Paul refers to in chapter 12.
- From Paul's perspective, these spiritual gifts are confirmation OR evidence that his testimony about Christ among them –in other words *the Gospel* -- had indeed taken root in the church in Corinth; -- these gifts were evidence that God was at work among them!

- Paul is *motivating the Corinthians by grace*. He is going to correct them in just a minute. But before doing so, he draws their attention to evidences of grace; he draws their attention to ways that God continues to be at work among them. Paul was so confident that God was at work in that church that it wasn't difficult for him to pinpoint and speak of that activity once he looked for it.

“...we will motivate others by grace when we perceive where and how He is at work in their lives and humbly let them know. They need to know because so often they're unaware. Too many Christians are more readily aware of the absence of God than they are of the presence of God, and they are more aware of sin than they are of grace. *God is at work*. We motivate others by grace when we help them to see this, and one of the greatest joys we can experience is when we watch them come to that awareness.”

– C.J. Mahaney

- Our knowledge that God is at work in the lives of our fellow believers, should make us like “evidences of grace” detectors. And when we see grace, it should be like a loud siren goes off in our heads saying, “I see grace! I see grace! I see grace! I see grace!”
- The effect on people can be significant if not dramatic at times.

### 3) *His knowledge of God's faithfulness (1:8)*

- Paul says that the Lord Jesus Christ “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 fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Fee writes of this verse

“What is remarkable is that Paul should express such a confidence about a community whose current behavior is anything but blameless and whom on several occasions he must exhort with the strongest kinds of warning.”

– Gordon Fee

- Before going on to correct the Corinthians in the rest of the book, Paul expresses that He has a great confidence when it comes to their future as a local church.
- Paul is confident because of one reason and one reason alone: he knows that His God is a faithful God and that the transformative momentum that God started when He first called the Corinthians and us will continue until His work in us is finished when Christ returns to bring us to glory.

- This verse is very similar to Philippians 1:6 where Paul says:

“And I am sure of this that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” – Philippians 1:16

#### **IV. Conclusion**

- Does this perspective, does Paul’s perspective matter to you when you relate to– that husband or that wife or that child or that fellow church-member that’s been so slow to change for so long?
- Does Paul’s perspective matter to you, when someone else’s sin or failure or shortcoming angers you or causes you to suffer?
- Paul’s example is before us in these verses because God wants us to follow it.
- God is calling each of us today to be more aware of evidences of God’s grace at work in our parents, our children, and in our fellow-church members. He is calling us think about, celebrate, and speak of the evidences of grace we see in them.
- In order to do so....
  - We must be far more aware of how much we have been forgiven -- than how much our brother or sister needs to change.
  - Remember that sin is not what defines your brother, your sister, your spouse, your children. God’s grace has come to them through the gospel.
  - Wholeheartedly believe in the work He is doing, conforming them into the likeness of His Son through the power of that gospel. We must remember God is faithful. He will complete the good work that He began.

## Questions for Reflection/Discussion

- Given the problems facing the Corinthian church, if you were writing this letter, how would you likely have begun?
- What is an evidence of grace?
- Why will a proud person find it difficult to see evidences of grace in other people?
- Explain this idea that “I am the worst sinner that I know.” Practically, how does this perspective alter the way we relate to other believers? How does it alter the way we relate to unbelievers? What are the consequences of failing to embrace this perspective?
- Without mentioning the names of specific other people -- what are the types of situations that you find it hardest to see grace in other believers?
- (1) How does the world respond to the failure and sins of others people? (2) How does God respond to the sins and failures of people? (3) How should we respond to the sins and failure of other people?
- What difference should the knowledge of God’s call, that God is at work and that God is faithful – what difference should knowing all of this make for how we relate to our fellow believers?
- In what ways do you believe God is calling you to change as a result of this message?