

January 7, 2018 - I Corinthians 1:1-3

“The Body of Christ (1): Called to be Holy”

Calling figures pretty large in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. And calling figures pretty large in our lives as well. The church, otherwise known as “The Body of Christ”, is called. **Like Paul, we are called to be holy-- despite of who we used to be or even who we perceive ourselves to be now—we are called to be holy, not by our own efforts but through the sanctifying grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.** Paul was called. Like him, you and I are called. And we are called to be holy.

I used to hate my name ... *Christopher*. I much prefer for people to just call me Chris. It’s a little more cool and hip than *Christopher*. And when I was a little kid, and I was in trouble, I’d get *Christopher*. I can still hear my dad now, *Chrrrrrrrrristopher!!! ... Oh, boy, NOW I’m gonna get it!*

... I wonder if some of us, or perhaps at some level, *all* of us kinda feel the same way when and as we talk of this call of God—and especially this call to be holy. ... *Oh, boy, NOW we’re gonna get it!* ... But God’s call is different ... in some ways God’s call is actually far, far more *demanding* than any human call we’ll ever receive, but in a wonderful, amazing way, God’s call is far, far, *far more loving*.

Paul was called. Vs.1: **“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes.”** Now, Sosthenes *may* a dude mentioned in Acts 18:17. But we can’t know for sure. But his buddies used to call him “Sos”—his street handle was 911—short for “S.O.S.” ... Actually, I just made all that up.

... But you know what *wasn’t* made up? Paul’s call wasn’t made up. In fact, Paul makes abundantly clear right here in vs.1, and throughout this letter, as well as in other letters too, as far as Paul himself was concerned, his calling wasn’t his idea. His calling was God’s idea. Not his. In fact, Scripture and history tells us that Paul did everything that he could to have Christians persecuted, imprisoned, and even taken out—*permanently*. But then Acts chapters 9 and 22 tell us that Paul met Jesus—while on one of us his sprees to arrest and take out Christians—on

the road to Damascus. Paul saw the Light—*literally*. And in Acts 9:15 the Resurrected Lord Jesus Himself says of Paul,

“... This man is my chosen instrument to carry My Name before the Gentiles (that is, before the nations of the world) and their kings and before the people of Israel.”

This man is My chosen instrument to carry My Name Paul didn't just wake up one morning and say to himself, *I'm going to be "church boy" for here on in!* No, no. It was God's idea. He was Jesus' chosen instrument.

And here in I Corinthians 1:1 Paul just heaps one phrase on after another to highlight and bold face and underline the fact that his calling was a *divine commission*, not some human calling.

He first describes himself as *called*. The Greek verb there is *kaleo*. This verb can mean to “call by name”, or “to name”—like I was named *Chrrrrristopher*. But the word also means to “summon or invite”. So it came to be understood as the calling of God for salvation. There is a sense in that we choose God. But at a far more profound level, God chooses us. He calls us. And I did a bit of a word study on this verb, *kaleo*, “call”—and I'll let you know a bit more about that word study in a minute.

But Paul was called. Then he says, he was *called to be an apostle*. And in the New Testament, in many or if not most or all instances “apostles” were related to people who were eye-witnesses to the Resurrected Lord Jesus. But at it's most basic sense, “apostle” simply means “a sent one”. It originally was used of a commissioned envoy—say, for the government, like an ambassador who represents in another country the president or prime minister and his or her government. Paul was called, he was sent as that kind of apostle of Christ Jesus.

And then, as if we're in any doubt where he's coming from, he adds, “by the will of God”. So, you see, Paul piles all these concepts, one on top of another, in this one simple verse: That rich, rich concept of the calling of God. To be an apostle, an envoy, an ambassador for the Risen Jesus. By the will of God. What's Paul communicating through all this? *Not my idea!!! This calling I've got was the calling of God all along!*

Why is that so powerful for us?

Well, because, like Paul, Corinth was called ... and we're called too. Look with me at vs.2: **"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."** Let me ask you a question. Do you call on the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ? If you do, ... then you too are lumped together with the believers in Corinth who are described in vs.2—every believer in Jesus lumped together with them through that little phrase at the end of the verse that says, *together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.*

Now, much like vs.1, in the first part of vs.2 Paul piles a bunch of important ideas together, kind of one on top of the other.

First of all, Paul says, **"To the church"** Now the word for "church" in the Greek is the word *ekklesia*. And originally, an *ekklesia* simply meant "assembly". It means simply "the called out ones"—and it could refer to any kind of assembly, be it a political assembly or a guild—any assembly. In Acts 19:32 & 41 it's used to describe a bunch of Ephesians who caused a riot. But here Paul isn't talking about just *any assembly*. Here Paul writes, *"To the ekklesia of God ... "*. See, just as calling is God's idea, ... so is church. Church is God's idea, not ours. Bible scholar Leon Morris notes that the early Christians back then "bypassed the regular Greek words in use for religious brotherhoods, and made this their characteristic name for believers." So Leon Morris goes on to say, "It points to the fact that the church is not merely one religious group among many. It is unique. Ordinary words will not do. But it is not just any 'assembly': it is the *ekklesia of God.*"

So then Paul writes, still in vs.2, **"to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy"**. Now, some of us may kinda/sorta figure out what that word "holy" means. But what does "sanctified" mean? Well, for starters, in the Greek "sanctified" and "holy" share the same root—they both come from the same word family. But "sanctified" means having a thing or a person *set aside* for purposes of worship or for God's purposes. It can also mean to "treat as holy" or "reverence". So in I Peter 3:15 God's Word there says, **"But in your hearts set apart** (literally "sanctify/treat as holy/reverence") **Christ as Lord."**

Finally, this word “sanctify” can mean not only something that *we* may do; it can *also* mean *something done to us*—or more accurately, something *God* can do *to us through His grace*. So I Thessalonians 5:23 says, **“May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** And it’s more this kind of *passive* meaning of *sanctify* that is in mind here when Paul writes, **“to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy”**. In Jesus, through trusting in Him, trusting in His grace, trusting that His grace is enough, trusting that He paid the price for our sins on the cross, that He *is the Lamb* of God Who takes away our sin, in Christ *we* are sanctified, *we are actually made holy* through *all that He has graciously done for us*. *It’s as if Jesus, and His finished work on the Cross and through the Empty Tomb, is a great shower through which we are cleansed; as if Jesus is a great Refuge where we can hide; as if Jesus is a great Shelter where all debts are paid. We are sanctified, made right, made holy, declared holy, declared cleansed IN Christ.* Another way in which we can put this is that we are set apart and placed in a holy position before God *because of our union through faith with Christ*.

But then, Paul writes, **“and called to be holy”**. In the Greek those two little words, “to be”, are not actually present—so the Greek literally reads “called holy”, but the “to be” is implied. So, while we don’t contribute one iota to our own salvation, we *do* have a part to play in our sanctification, we do have a part to play in that lifelong process of becoming holy. So put together, those two phrases in vs.2, **“to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy”**, kind of paint for us the role God plays and the role we can play in this work of becoming holy. Leon Morris says unapologetically, “With us the idea conveyed by both words is that of high moral character.”

You see, sanctification, this process of being declared holy as well as being made holy in practice is both, #1, and definitive act of God, as well as, #2, a lifelong process. We are declared holy, made holy in Christ, through His sacrifice alone—not through *anything* that we do nor ever could do. But then, *because of that declaration* we receive the call to *live into that reality, over time, through growth in character, in our everyday lives*. And all along, it’s God Himself Who calls.

Remember that word study on “call” that I alluded to? Well, sometimes God’s call in Jesus is related to that *call to holiness*. So Galatians 5:13 says, **“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.”** And I Peter 1:15 says, **“But just as He Who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do”** There are other times when God’s call in Jesus is related to *God’s grace in our lives*. So Jesus Himself says in Matthew 3:13, **“For I have not come to call righteous, but sinners”** And an exasperated Paul is able to say in Galatians 1:6, **“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the One Who called you by the grace of Christ, and are turning to a different gospel”**

But here’s a really, really awesome thing: There are *other* occasions God calls us in Christ to His holiness *and* His grace simultaneously, *at the same time!* So in II Timothy 1:9 Paul is able to write of the God **“Who has saved us and called us to live a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ before the beginning of time”** It’s just this simultaneous call to holiness *and* grace that inspired Peter to write in II Peter 1:3, **“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him Who called us by His own glory and goodness.”**

See, God’s grace seeks to change and transform us on the daily. God’s grace in Jesus saves us totally, saves us completely, saves us so perfectly that there’s not a thing we need to do to contribute to our own salvation. But here’s yet another amazing thing about God’s grace: It’s never content to leave us where we are. Instead, it calls us *higher*; *God’s grace calls us to grow every day of our lives in holiness!*

That’s one of the *other* amazing things about God’s grace—*it never gives up on us!* No matter how messed up we may be—*God’s amazing grace never, ever gives up on us!* That’s what makes Paul’s address to the Corinthians so amazing! Paul writes, inspired by the Holy Spirit Himself, **“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy”** Paul writes those amazing words of both challenge and grace to a church *that was right properly messed up*. How

messed up were they at the church in Corinth? I'm telling you, *right properly messed up.*

This wasn't a church with just one problem, or even a few problems—this church was *riddled with problems*—they had a morality problem, they had sex scandals, they had money issues, they had legal problems, they had holier-than-thou types who made life difficult, they had problems with religious pluralism, they had worship problems, they had problems with cliques, they had problems understanding the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts, they had misunderstandings over the most basic doctrines, like the doctrine of the resurrection—they had more problems than you can shake a stick at.

And yet-- unlike so many today who, when they see problems in a given church, go shop for another, or, even worse, stop going altogether—*Paul refused to give up on them—and far, far more importantly, God refused to give up on them too! And if there was hope for Corinth there is most certainly hope for us!*

So one commentator puts it like this: “Despite their frequent quarrels, factions, and immorality, Paul nevertheless describes the Corinthians as people who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus (compare Ephesians 5:27). In this epistle, Paul first states that believers have been set aside by God to live holy lives and then paradoxically points out their sins and shortcomings.” (Simon J. Kistemaker)

What's the key to such unstoppable hope and such an uncompromising challenge?

Real quick, vs.3: **“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** It all starts with Grace my friends—that unmerited favor, that limitless love, that sold-out affection and acceptance that God extends to us in and through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* Paul uses that identical greeting in Romans (1:7b), II Corinthians (1:2), Galatians (1:3), Ephesians 1:2, and Philemon (3). But perhaps never before more needed than right here in I Corinthians. *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Did you notice that grace comes first? Grace always comes first. In the Greek world, they used to greet one another with a word, *chairein*, which means simply, “greetings”. It’s derived form is *charis*, which means “grace”, a “free gift”, “unmerited favor”. But in the Jewish world, they’d greet one another with “shalom”—which means “peace”—but it meant more than the absence of war or conflict—it had to do with the full blessing, the full flourishing of God. But as one wise soul once commented, “... grace is always first, peace is always second. This is due to the fact that grace is the source of peace. Without grace there is and can be no peace; but when grace is ours, peace must of necessity follow.” (Lanski, quoted in Simon J. Kistemaker)

But never, ever forget the Source of that grace and peace: The Source of that grace and peace is **“from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** See, God calls us to holiness. But then He supplies His holiness to us as a free gift of grace in Christ. In Jesus, through Christ, we are *made* holy; we are *declared* holy. But it is out of that gracious provision of sanctification that we are challenged *to be* holy in our daily lives—regardless of how *unholy* we may be, regardless of how messed up we are, the challenge still stands: but the *fuel* for that challenge is nothing other than this—*the grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

... I used to hate the name *Christopher*. But now I love it. For I now know what it means ... it means, “Christ-bearer”. And I can bear that Name joyfully because I know that as I bear the Name of Jesus, Jesus Himself bears and carries me.

At the awesome conclusion of his great book, *Impossible People*, Os Guinness writes, “So the impossible people gain their strength from an impossible God who is greater than all, who can be trusted in all situations and who strengthens his people to stand even against death. Despite everyone and despite everything, we are called to stand, and stand we must as God’s impossible people. However sweet the seduction, however popular and powerful the tide, however plausible the different gospel, however scornful or brutal the attacks, and however fearful the threats, impossible people stand, faithful only to Jesus, our Lord and our God. So may it be in our time.” (O. Guinness, *Impossible People*, pg.216, 217)

I love what I'm called now. How about you? Do you know what you're called? If you have called Jesus Savior and Lord, then this is who you are: you are "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." We are called by none other than Him Who is our grace and our peace to be holy. Here it is in a nutshell: **Like Paul, we are called to be holy-- despite of who we used to be or even who we perceive ourselves to be now—we are called to be holy, not by our own efforts but through the sanctifying grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**