

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 15, 2017

Prayer of the Day: Almighty God, you gave your one and only Son to be the light of the world. Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and believed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and forever

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! He said to me, "You are my servant in whom I will display my splendor. Alleluia! (Isaiah 49:3)

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

I want to start by asking you a question. You do not have to raise your hand, stand up, and share your answer out loud. Keep your answer in your mind. Be honest. Don't worry about someone laughing at you. Don't feel pressured to

give the "right answer"— something you feel people expect (or want) to hear. So, since no one knows what you're thinking, form one specific, concrete thought. Alright? Here it is: ***What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your church?***

Have a thought? ... a sentence? ... a general idea? ...something? Good. Your answer reveals what you consider important here; that's why it is the first thing on your mind. Over the past few years, I have come across other answers to that question. To some, the idea of "church" is nothing more than a building— something people built long ago and now feel a driving desire to keep open (kind of like keeping a landmark open). Others feel "church" a place where a preacher lays out rules to change your behavior. Or "church" is seen as somewhere only people who are hurting or struggling can find instant help. A few others consider "church" a place like school. (In school you learn how to draft parabolas, but you don't know when you will use this in life.) You learn all these Bible-facts, but you do not always understand how those facts apply during the next six days of your week. Now, be honest with yourself (and keep your answer in your mind). Did any of those answers touch your first thought?

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

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:

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— ⁶ because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Gauging by what I shared, there appears to be some difficulty in nailing down what a “church” is— why you own a building, what you hear in it, and what you gain from it. If you cannot focus on the most precious feature of “church,” then you begin losing focus on why you gather here.

That is why we are starting a new series called: **REMAIN FOCUSED!** For the next six Sundays we will study 1 Corinthians and focus on your [individual] role in your [entire] congregation. That means you— whatever your age, your abilities, your job status, or how long you’ve been here. Jesus has *made you a vital component* and he intends *keeping you in his family*. **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON JESUS.**

It is as though Paul taps on this image of Jesus. **“REMAIN FOCUSED... ON JESUS! REMAIN FOCUSED... ON JESUS!”** Why? Well, because the believers in Corinth had so much trouble focusing on Jesus! Their time together was spent debating over who the better pastor was: either the apostle Paul or pastor Apollos or pastor Peter ([1:12](#)). Rich believers looked down their noses on poor believers. Some elevated the gift of speaking in tongues as the best (and most important) gift to have— and any other spiritual gift was looked down upon. Really, “church” transformed into a place where each individual could measure self-worth.

That’s why every single time the focus drifted onto personal glory, Paul yanks their attention right back to Jesus. I mean, look through the opening nine verses. Take a pencil (or use your finger) and count how many times you read: “*Christ Jesus*” or “*our Lord Jesus Christ*.” Count them? Nine times in nine verses: “*our Lord Jesus Christ*” or “*in Christ Jesus*” appears. (Nowhere else in all of Scripture is “Jesus Christ” mentioned in nine consecutive verses). Paul sets your attention on the most important thing you are to find in your “church:” It’s Jesus.

Do you come here and focus on him? You live in a world that measures success by numbers. It’s called American capitalism. If your business makes more money and increases its client-count, then it must be succeeding. If your business makes less money and loses clients, then something is wrong; you are failing. The world’s definition of “success” can be the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your “church.” You focus on people: who is here, who is not here, what age people are, what jobs they have, what their community status or reputation looks like. If your numbers increase, then it feels like you are succeeding; if your numbers decrease, then something must be wrong; you are failing. Remember American capitalism works well for business. God’s church is not a business and God does not rule his church by American capitalism.

Or maybe the focus drifts down to you. When you think of your “church,” maybe a part of you thinks about the things you want— and not the one thing needful ([Luke 10:41-42](#)). You may concentrate more on community approval of your church instead of anchoring yourself in the pure Word of God. You may place more emphasis on what church does instead of what it teaches. The first thing that can come to mind is: what you want to get instead of what Jesus gives to you!

Do you see the problems that arise when you lose focus on why you are here in the first place? You lose **FOCUS... ON JESUS!** If Jesus is not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your “church,” then how important is he to you?

Not finding Jesus really all that important has led preachers into false teaching. It has led people to consider the teaching of forgiveness boring or redundant. It has led people to feel their effort, their “goodness” is what God teaches us to do. For these reasons Paul continually yanks our attentions back to Jesus.

He taps on this image of your Savior and stresses: **“REMAIN FOCUSED... ON JESUS!”** Why? Because he *made you a vital component*.

You!—individually! Did you catch that? Paul’s definition of “church” is not a building. It is not this disembodied concept of an institution. Paul says that you, the individual believer, make up this “church.” **To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy[.]** In the original language of the New Testament [Greek] “church” [ἐκκλησία / “ecclesia”] means *people with shared belief, a community, a congregation*.

Each of you share one thing in common: you are sanctified. To “be sanctified” means to “be set apart as holy.” God sees each of you as holy. You have a Savior who did not focus on worldly goals. He did not teach whatever felt popular or self-serving. You have a Savior whose heart delighted in spending time with his God. His life is the reason you get to call heaven yours.

God the Holy Spirit has used the Word to teach you this. He worked in the waters of baptism to wash away personal glory from our own hearts. God made the effort, he took the step to make you “holy.” In fact, God has “set you apart” from a non-believing world and has changed your focus entirely.

What is the number one reason you are here? Well, Paul tells you: you **call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ[.]** “Calling on the name of the Lord” simply means “to worship.” You confess your reliance on God. You sing praises— not praise to me or to the person next to you— you praise God for the great things he has done and has taught and still promises to do. You place concerns and worries into his hands.

You see, Paul clearly highlights the number one reason you gather together: (1) God first called you to faith and in response to his love (2) you worship him!

So, what’s the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your “church?” Let it be this: Jesus! Always only Jesus! **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON JESUS** *who made you vital component and who keeps you in his family*.

Moved by his love, you constructed a building so that you can gather and focus on him speaking to you from his Word. You built a font where he comes to you in water, where you bring your children to him in baptism. You crafted an altar where he comes to you in body and blood, bread and wine. We did not make this up. Rather, God uses these tools to bring his **grace to you!** ([Titus 3:5-6](#); [Matthew 26:26-28](#))

So, not only did God’s grace move him to send Jesus, but each day you get to live under this shower of grace. You were forgiven yesterday. Today you stand forgiven. You

know God still faithfully forgives you when you stumble and fall again. That means you have **peace**.

The most astounding factor of that peace? God is **our Father**. Think of approaching the President of the United States. Foreign leaders call him: “Mr. President.” Interviewers call him: “President So-and-so.” No one calls the President by his first name— except his wife and children. In fact, many who approach him rehearse what they will ask in hopes to win his favor. Not so with God. You can approach him at any time. You can call him “Father.” You need not fear how unprofessional you sound. You live in peace because God *keeps you in his family*.

Being in God’s family means **you have been enriched in every way**[.]It’s as though God opened up a bank vault containing all the wealth in the world and says, “Here you go!” You overflow **in all your speaking and in all your knowledge**. You speak that you are forgiven because God teaches you are forgiven. So, you can sing a hymn like: *Just As I am without One Plea / But that your blood was shed for me* and know that it applies to you. So you speak the Lord’s Prayer and know that God, your Father, works his will in your life, gives you daily bread, forgives your sin, and protects you from all evil.

Do you notice the beauty of verse 5? The verb is past tense. It means that you already swim in this storehouse! You— individually— gather here and **FOCUS ON... JESUS** *keeping you in his family*.

You do not lack any spiritual gift[... You are] eagerly wait[ing] for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. One day Jesus will come again. We do not know when— but we stand prepared. Each Sunday you gather, you stand on your tiptoes to see Jesus better. To look over the trouble in this world and stare at the heavens, waiting for Jesus to deliver and from a world of pain safely to his side.

And **[God] will keep you strong to the end**. You gather here and are continually assured: *God, your heavenly Father, has been merciful to you, and has given you Jesus* to remove your sins— yes, even those you fear are “too big” to forgive, those sins you still hate thinking about—yes, God forgives those. He will find you **blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ**.

God is faithful. He will keep his promises. So, when he says: “*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved,*” then that you will go to heaven ([Mark 16:16](#)). When he says: “*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,*” then the you who trust in Jesus’ forgiveness will give you eternal life ([John 3:16](#)). You gather here and **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON JESUS** *who keeps you in his family*.

So, one last time: ***What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of your church?*** Look past the people here. Look deeper than a selfish want. **FOCUS ON JESUS**. Not just that he existed, but that Jesus speaks specifically to you— individually, personally. He has *made you a vital component*; he has brought you into his family.

What a great place to start when focusing on your [individual] role in your [entire] congregation. Because, in a way, it starts with you. It starts with God coming to you in his Word and sacraments. It starts with you regularly gathering around Jesus and his Word and his sacraments.

Jesus has *made you a vital component* and he intends *keeping you in his family*. **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON JESUS**.