

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.

(1 Corinthians 1:1-9)

Why does a Pastor Give Thanks for his People?

We just heard St. Paul say, **“I always thank God for you.”** Of course, he was talking about the people in the congregation in Corinth. Why did he give thanks for them? Does a pastor give thanks for his people because they gave him a job? Certainly, we pastors should be grateful for the gifts of love our people bring that support our families. But that could become a cynical approach to ministry really quickly, if it led to making our work all about making sure we got paid. So what better reasons could we find? Does a pastor give thanks because his people love him and his family, because they show friendship to his children and his wife and to him personally? Without a doubt. One of the gifts of being a Christian is that we are one in Christ and we get to experience each other’s love and friendship. St. Paul certainly speaks in many places of the joy he took in the love that his congregations showed him. But in our epistle lesson this morning, he takes us in a different direction. The things he tells us today are true even if a congregation doesn’t always do a good job of loving its pastor. They’re true for any pastor who remembers what God called him to do. **Why does a pastor give thanks for his people?**

I. Because God has enriched them.

II. Because God will keep them strong.

I.

Notice, those are not things the people do for their pastors. They’re things that God does for the people. That is what Paul was talking about when he said, **“I always thank God for you.”** It’s a lesson that every pastor or teacher or even lay leader in every congregation needs to learn. **Why does a pastor give thanks for his people? Because God has enriched them.**

St. Paul said, **“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 ...”** Grace means the undeserved love of God. The idea behind the Greek word is simply a gift. Not something you earn or deserve. Not even something that you exchange with others. Not a social obligation. But a freely chosen, even unexpected, and totally undeserved, expression of love. That grace of God makes congregations rich.

Paul addressed this letter, **“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: ...”** He mentions a lot of gifts there. But the most basic one is to be sanctified in Christ Jesus. What does that mean? In the “church speak” of the Lutheran Church, to be “sanctified” usually means our Christian lives. But the Greek word simply means “to make holy.” Christians are sanctified, they are made holy, in two senses. God makes us holy when he leads us to change our lives and live for him. But before he ever does that, he makes us holy when he gives us faith. God takes rebellious sinners who have nothing good inside them and he applies the gospel to us and he then sees us as holy and perfect. He makes us know that our sin is washed away. That’s what Paul means when he says that the church in Corinth was sanctified in the name of Christ Jesus. And it’s something every faithful pastor needs to give thanks for, every time he see his people. They have been washed in the waters of Holy Baptism. They have peace in their hearts because they know that God does not count their sins against them anymore.

Jesus has rescued you with his blood. If I ever were to see a real rescue – if I were at the beach and someone were drowning and I watched the lifeguards pull him or her out of the water and do CPR, and then that

person coughed and started to breathe, I think I would thank God at that moment for that rescue. If I knew that individual personally, I think I might thank God every time I ran into them. Well God has rescued you from sin and death and hell. How can I fail to thank God for you?

But that's not the end of God making you rich. God has called you to be holy. This is sanctification in the way we usually think of it. God has called you to live a new and holy life because you know your Savior. Of course, pastors love to see that happening. It's a true joy when I ask a question in confirmation class and a hand goes up that I didn't expect and that child shows that he or she understands and trusts what God has done. It's easy to give thanks for that. But notice, Paul doesn't actually mention the living of the holy life here. He mentions the call, the invitation to be holy, not the success. Why? In part, it's because we're all a work in progress here on this earth. We will all need to keep growing in living as Christians until we stop breathing.

But there's even a bigger reason: Paul rejoices because the call itself is the gospel, not the law. The call to be holy is more than just an invitation. It's a miracle that God does. When you came to faith, he reached into your heart and recreated you as holy. We call that "the new man." He lives inside you and fights against sin every single day. Every pastor should give thanks that God put that believer there. We need to remember he's there when we don't see him winning! When you lose the battle, that reminds us why we needed Jesus to die for us and why we needed Jesus to make us new and why we will always need him to work in us. And Jesus will always do that. You are that rich.

Paul said, "**You have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge.**" That congregation knew the gospel. They shared the gospel. When Christians have the gospel in their hearts, it spills out in all kinds of subtle ways just by what you think and feel and do and say. You're not planning to show your faith. It's just there. That's how rich God makes you. Paul points out that it confirms the message we pastors preach: you live it and know it and speak it. That leads to all kinds of spiritual gifts, everything from administering the church's finances, to comforting people who hurt, to teaching, to giving generous offerings, to taking care of our church's property. The ability to do those things comes from God working in our hearts. Those gifts make us rich in Christ, far richer than a big pay check ever could. It's a blessing for me to see what God does in you. When God calls guys like me to serve the richly blessed people of God, we give thanks because you are part of how he makes us rich.

II.

Pastors are pretty blessed, aren't they? Not just because we get paid for talking. We're blessed because we get to work with the people of God. We get to see the rich gifts of the gospel. But there's even more.

Why does a pastor give thanks for his people? Because God will keep them strong.

St. Paul said, "**He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" This is one of those statements that could serve as the ordination sermon text for every new pastor because St. Paul didn't say, "Keep your people strong to the end." He said, "He" – meaning Jesus – "will keep them strong to the end." It's not my job to keep you strong. It's my job to baptize you and commune you and teach you. It's my job to call you to repent and to assure of Jesus' forgiveness. It's my job to remind you of Jesus' love and care and presence, to remind you to take all that troubles you to him in prayer. But it's not my job to keep you strong. Only God can do that. He works through that gospel message, which he calls the power of God.

He promises that he will keep you strong in faith to the end. But when you're standing where I stand, does it always look like he keeps that promise? Sometimes it doesn't. When I count how many adults I've confirmed in the ten years that I've served here and then look for them in church, when I count the confirmands that I've blessed here and in many cases, even sent on to HVL for continuing Lutheran education, and then I don't see them here, year after year, it's hard to see the truth of what God says here. Can you understand that? What am I to do? Remember that God makes a promise. The Holy Spirit can even work when a sinner lies dying and God calls back to their minds the truths they learned in catechism class and the promise he made to them in their baptism. I can't see into the human heart, but God can. He can take a person to heaven before their faith dies. Before the world began, God chose us. He promises that he will never let even one of his chosen ones slip away. He will keep us strong in the faith, even when it's just a mustard seed of faith, and he will bring all his chosen ones home to heaven.

On that day, you will all be blameless in his sight. What was the last thing that you really felt guilty about? The way God designed the ministry, it's easy for Christian people to think that their pastors don't really

face temptation the way that you do. I submit to you that nothing could be further from the truth. I wrestle with sin every single day. Because we all feel the burden of our sin, it's easy for us to point to external things to try to escape from feeling guilty. How often do we come to church? How much do we do there? How much do we give? Isn't it more than that guy over there? But no matter how much we look down on people who aren't as active or as generous as we are, no matter how often we tell ourselves that we're better, our conscience knows it's just not true. We sin and we feel it. We run away from it. At times, we may even engage in self-destructive behavior because we're trying to silence that guilt. But it never really works.

What does? Jesus. He died and he rose. He washed all our sin away. When God looks at us, he sees Jesus. He promises that when we stand before his throne, he is going to call us blameless. He's going to say that we never sinned. He's going to welcome us home. There is nothing that I can give thanks for more than the fact that God promised that to you. So no matter how much I stumble around trying to say it, no matter how hard you find it to listen to me, no matter how little good I do for you here, and no matter how hard it is for you to imagine truly being guilt free, when Jesus returns, you will never feel guilty again. You will know that you are holy and blameless in God's sight and you will rejoice in his love forever.

That message is God's power to overcome your hurts and your struggles, your guilt and your weakness while you walk the path to heaven here. You'll need to hear it again and again, because that new man that God put in your heart isn't alone. The old man is there calling you a hypocrite over and over again. But the gospel is God's power to keep your grip on Jesus strong, even in the face of the worst guilt feelings your sinful heart can generate. You are his. You are forgiven. He will bring you home and free your heart from those feelings forever. We pastors can only thank God that that's true.

When I starting writing this sermon, I had this big plan that I was going to talk about pastors and their congregations all the way through and then in the conclusion, I was going to say "And that's true for me and you." Obviously, I wasn't able to keep that up. But it is true for me and you. Why should I give thanks to God for you? Are we always happy here at Peace? Do we always give as generously as we could? Are we always positive about what God is doing here? No. We're sinners and we will be until we see the Lord. We will have challenges until he returns. But we also have his promise. St. Paul says, "**God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.**" God made you Jesus' brother. He forgave you and brought you into his own family. He will keep his promises to make you rich in the gospel. He will keep his promises to make you strong in the gospel. Through those promises, he will comfort us and lead us to live for him. May God's promises work in my heart and in yours. May he teach me to always see his gifts in you. My friends, I thank God for you. May God make that true always. Amen.