

Embracing God's Grace in the Church

2 Corinthians 1:1–2
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Tonight, we're starting our study of the New Testament book known as 2 Corinthians. We call it this because it's the second of two books that the Holy Spirit gave to the church at Corinth through the apostle Paul.

But we shouldn't think Paul wrote just these two letters to the Corinthians. He mentioned a letter that he wrote before 1 Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5:9, which says, *I wrote unto you in an epistle not to keep company with fornicators*. This earlier letter, which the Corinthians seem to have misunderstood, was his first letter to the church, and 1 Corinthians was his second. It's possible that he also wrote another letter between 1 and 2 Corinthians. This means that 2 Corinthians was either his third or fourth letter to the church.

Now, this is already confusing enough, but critics of the Bible make it worse. Some say that 2 Corinthians wasn't originally a single letter, but two that were eventually merged. They base this on the fact that the transition between chapters 9 and 10 is rather abrupt. But, of course, Paul wasn't known for his writing style. Others claim that a few verses from chapters 6 and 7 (i.e., 6:14–7:1) were cut and pasted from the letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians before 1 Corinthians. There's no evidence for either of these theories. Liberals just think they're better editors of God's Word than he is.

In any case, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to accomplish several objectives. One is that he had to give further instructions regarding the man who committed incest with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1–5). Although he repented (2 Cor. 2:5–6), the church treated him harshly. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to minister comfort and healing instead (vv. 7–11). Plus, he had to address other issues that had arisen since his last letter or visit, like collecting money for the church in Jerusalem (chs. 8–9) and challenging false teachers who questioned his authority as an apostle (chs. 10–12).

With all of this in mind, let's now turn to the text. Tonight, our focus is its first two verses.

Servants of Jesus Christ

Let's start with Paul's authorship and apostleship, both of which he rather affirmed matter-of-factly in verse 1. He wrote, *Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God*.

In our study of 1 Corinthians, we talked about what an apostle is. An apostle is someone who's been commissioned with authority to speak and act for someone else. Paul was an apostle of the Sanhedrin before he became a Christian. He was working for them when he went to Damascus to arrest believers. But Jesus met him on the way and made him his own apostle. Afterward, Paul spoke and acted with the authority of Jesus' name. He wrote Scripture in Jesus' name. He started churches for Jesus and established the traditions by which they would live. Sometimes, he even commanded the churches what to do, as he had done with the incestuous man. Because the Corinthians were immature in their faith, he addressed them harshly at times. They, and maybe sometimes he, thought he was too severe. But he had to do it. It's what Jesus wanted him to do.

Recognizing Paul's apostolic office was especially important in 2 Corinthians because certain individuals had attacked his authority by questioning his credentials and character. They said that he was unreliable, weak and unimpressive. They even said that they knew more about Jesus than he did. So, how did Paul deal with this? He defended his apostolic office by setting the record straight. He suffered for the gospel. He preached the cross of Jesus Christ with integrity, sometimes using signs and wonders, visions and revelations. He worked hard and was kindhearted towards God's people. When they sinned, he called them back to the Lord. And, yes, he stood toe-to-toe against the false apostles who were masquerading as the servants of God.

Now, Paul didn't write these things to brag about his office or accomplishments. On the contrary, he said that he had become an apostle *by the will of God*. It was all God's doing, not his. His goal was to spread the gospel. And the Corinthians needed to know this because their growth in trust and obedience would come only by understanding that Jesus spoke to them through Paul.

Verse 1 also says that Timothy was with Paul when he wrote this letter. When he wrote 1 Corinthians, Sosthenes was with him. Sosthenes was the chief ruler of the synagogue in Corinth when Paul arrived there on his second missionary journey: he became a Christian and was soon thereafter beaten for his faith (Acts 18:12–17). He's probably the one who carried the church's update to Paul, which helped Paul deal with various matters in the church. Timothy also met Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–3). Paul asked him to accompany him, and they became close friends and colleagues for the rest of Paul's ministry. Timothy assisted the work in Corinth and kept Paul abreast of its progress.

But neither Sosthenes nor Timothy were apostles. Only Paul had that office and authority, so 2 Corinthians was mostly his letter, humanly speaking. Timothy was with him when he wrote it. He might have helped him edit it. But its primary author was Paul, whom the Spirit of God moved to write his infallible Word.

Sinners to Saints

Verse 1 also identifies the recipients of this epistle as *the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints which are in all Achaia*.

Every church has its own character, just as each of our children is unique. When someone mentions a particular church, you might say to yourself, “Oh, that’s the church that [fill in the blank].” This is how Jesus spoke to the seven churches of Asia Minor in the book of Revelation. Well, the church at Corinth had a reputation for a lot of things, and most of them weren’t good. We’ve seen many of its faults in our study of 1 Corinthians and don’t need to go over them again. But what we need to see here is that Paul, after going through and dealing with all the sins of the Corinthian congregation and now getting himself ready to face a few new ones, still called the gathering of professing Christians in Corinth *the church of God*. He even said that its members were *saints*.

Sometimes, I wonder if we could pull this off. If we knew of a church plagued with all the problems of the one in Corinth, could we recognize it as God’s church? Or would it have to clean itself up before we could say that? If we met believers caught up in the many sins that Paul had to deal with, could we call them saints or holy people? Or do we think we get to be harder on others than God? Do we fool ourselves into thinking that we can peer into people’s hearts and discover what’s really there?

We know that we’re not saved by works. If anyone would claim otherwise, we’d be up in arms in an instant to stamp out this evil monster. But when we judge other churches and other believers, do we hold them to a different standard? Do we expect them to reform themselves before God’s grace can reach them?

Let’s not forget how Paul described the church at Corinth. He didn’t call it the First Self-Righteous Church or the Holier Than Thou Church or the Do Your Own Thing Church. No, he called it *the church of God*. It’s God’s church. It existed only because God created it, sustained it and promised to preserve it to the end. It’s a reality because Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, paid for it with his precious blood. Isn’t this what Paul told the Corinthians in his first letter? *For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s* (1 Cor. 6:20). And if you want to see what this looks like in real life, Paul described it just a few verses before the one I just read. He wrote, *Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God* (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

Those who expect the church on earth to be perfect are just dreaming. They're not taking the doctrine of total depravity seriously. They're forgetting that the Lord sets his people apart and works in us day by day to make us what we ought to be. And what made the church in Corinth stand out here is that it, by the grace of God, responded to the grace of God. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is much more positive than his first. And this reminds us that we have to do everything in our power to help the church as a whole and each believer move along in this process, always depending on the sovereign grace of God.

A Double Blessing

Speaking of God's grace, let's now turn our attention to Paul's greeting in verse 2: *Grace be to you and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Grace is a fascinating word. The Greeks used it kind of like 'hello' or 'good day.' It wasn't exactly the same, though, because for them it had a sense of favor. Being Greek, they thought they were smarter and wiser than everyone else. Others were just barbarians. But simply being Greek doesn't make anyone right before God. Only the grace of God in Jesus Christ can do this. And so, Paul greeted the churches of Corinth, as well as other churches, with God's grace. Today, we start our worship services with one of the many greetings of the New Testament.

And let's be clear: when we talk about God's grace, we mean that his favor is completely undeserved, unmerited and unearned. We did nothing to get it. The only reason we have it is that God gave it to us as a free gift. Romans 5:18 says, *Therefore is by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.*

The word *peace* is just as interesting. This is the word the Jews used to greet each other. But for them, peace was a much bigger idea than it is for us. *Shalom* is a wholeness or completeness of life that flows out of God's mercy to undeserving sinners. It's not just that a person has 'peace of mind' or 'peace with his neighbor' or, as Dave Ramsey says, 'financial peace,' but that everything in his life is at peace. He's whole again. His relationship with God has been restored. And this peace comes only at the greatest cost — blood atonement. Only the blood of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, can reconcile depraved, messed-up sinners to a perfectly holy God.

So, do you see what Paul has done? He's taken two distinct greetings and combined them into one huge double blessing for the church. The work of Jesus Christ gives you everything the Greeks thought they had and everything the Jews wanted. It's all yours because you belong to him.

Now, you may not be feeling all this in your life right now. A lot of Christians don't. Feelings are unreliable. Sometimes we don't feel God's grace and peace because we cling to our sins and refuse to let them go. Other times it's because we don't appreciate all that it means to be forgiven or we're not pursuing God's grace as we should. Maybe we don't know how. Maybe our hearts are cold to the things of God.

If that's where you are today, I want you to look at our text again. God the Father and God the Son promised grace and peace to the church. You should never doubt their will to give these things to you. Yes, you need to forsake your sins. Yes, you need to chase hard after his grace. But these things come from God's promise and are not its cause. The Lord says, "My child, I give grace and peace for you because my Son died in your place on the cross!" Cling to this as your only hope! Never forget it!

God has given us grace and peace in Jesus Christ. He's called us to be his church and people, and he made it so by the blood of his Son. He promises to keep us and bless us throughout all eternity.

The grace and peace of God aren't empty words. They're realities that shape our lives, our thoughts and our relationships. They're gifts we need to receive with joy and eagerness, and treasures that we should pursue every day. So, let's live in the light of God's grace and peace, as the Corinthians learned to do, and glorify him in everything. Amen.