

2. From riches to rags

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Del Vecchio, one of five children of an Italian widowed mother, was eventually sent to an orphanage, because she couldn't care for him any longer. He would later work in a factory making molds of auto parts and eyeglass frames. At the age of 23, Del Vecchio opened his own molding shop, which expanded to become the world's largest maker of sunglasses and prescription eyewear, including the brands, such as Ray-Ban and Oakley. His current wealth is somewhere around \$23 billion, according to Forbes magazine.

We love to hear stories of "From rags to riches", like Vecchio. But we tend to raise our eyebrows and roll our eyes for the story of "From riches to rags" like the church of Corinthians. Of course, I am talking about the story of "From riches to rags" in their spirituality. In the Book of 1 Corinthians Paul addresses the impoverished spiritual condition of this church and tells how to be restored to their spiritual wealth.

A. CALLED TO BE AN APOSTLE OF CHRIST

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

Paul identifies himself in the opening of this letter, reminding the Corinthians of his position, credential, and authority. The Corinthians obviously knew that Paul was an apostle. So why did he remind them? Because only a person with such authority would be able to bring the rebukes, the words of admonition, the severe criticism he was about to bring – and have them accepted.

The meaning of the Greek word "apostolos," which has the meaning of "a special ambassador." There are only the 12 apostles in Christianity. The 11 were chosen by Jesus while He was on the earth in human form. The last one is Paul who was on the way to Damascus called by the resurrected Jesus from heaven.

I am sure that some of you might have heard of the "modern day apostles." I don't know whether they received the title from someone or were appointed by themselves. But not according to the Bible, because there are no other people in the world who can hold the office of the apostles with the full title and authority like these 12.

We need to look at the qualifications of the apostles, so that when someone declares that he is an apostle, we will know that he is lying:

1) The apostle had received his commission directly from the Savior. – Acts 9:15

The Lord appeared to him and declared him ordained of God.

2) The apostle had seen the resurrected Christ with his own eyes. – 1 Corinthians 15:1-9

3) The apostle had the God-given authority to perform miracles at will. – Acts 2:43

He had power to heal, to discern good and evil, to speak boldly without error.

4) The apostle was a personal student of Christ. – Galatians 1:17

Since Paul did not get to have a personal tutoring like the 11 apostles, before Paul started his ministry, he was taken to Arabia by the Lord and was taught there in person.

The man named Sosthenes is perhaps mentioned in Acts 18:17, as the head of a Corinthian synagogue who was beaten because he persecuted Paul. When Paul first

came to Corinth, the ruler of the synagogue was a man named Crispus. Crispus believed on the Lord with all his household, according to the same chapter, and was saved. So he was fired – or quit – from his job as ruler of the synagogue. His replacement was a man named Sosthenes, but he was beaten by the Roman officials in a bit of anti-Semitic backlash against the Jews who tried to persecute Paul. Perhaps this same Sosthenes in Acts 18:17 is now with Paul, so Paul calls attention to the man with him whom the Corinthian Christians would know as “Sosthenes our brother.”

B. SANCTIFIED, CALLED TO BE SAINTS

1 Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

1 Corinthians is addressed to the church. Paul addressed them as sanctified, which means “set apart by God to be His holy people.” Sanctification isn’t something that we buy from a Christian bookstore; nor is it dependent on our actions. Sanctification is a position in Christ. It’s how God sees us. Holy and set apart.

Paul also gives his recipients another title: “saints.” Those of you who read through this Book of 1 Corinthians know that Paul called them out in this 16 chapter Book. He did not hold back any of his words. They were shown to have, at times, morality problems, doctrine problems, church government problems, spiritual gift problems, church service problems, and authority problems. It might be easy for us to think they weren’t even saved. But they were. So they were called saints.

The unbiblical definition of “saint” by the Catholics gives a wrong concept to the biblically ignorant people. As the papacy increased its power, it claims the exclusive authority to name a saint. Being a saint has absolutely nothing to do with the religious organization’s power, but it has everything to do with the atoning sacrifice of our Lord Jesus for our salvation and a simple free will of man to accept Jesus into one’s heart.

Saint means “devoted, consecrated, pure, and holy.” In God’s eyes, we are cleansed and uniquely marked by His Son Jesus, not because of what we have done or can do, rather what Christ has done on the cross.

So, you are looking at Saint JK now.

It’s hard for all of us who wrestle with our own sins daily, who give in to the same temptation over and over again, to think of ourselves as pure and holy, especially in the eyes of a holy God. But that’s the amazing thing about His grace. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, we are clothed in His righteousness. And when God looks at us, that’s what He sees – the pure, spotless robes of Jesus. Rest in your position in Jesus. And let this truth motivate you to be worthy of Him who has so lavishly clothed you.

C. PAUL’S GREETINGS

1 Corinthians 1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Being aware of the church’s divisiveness, the apostle Paul greets them with the desire that they would experience grace and peace – two virtues they needed to keep a church in harmony. Paul wanted the Corinthians to be known as gracious saints who lived at peace with one another.

Grace is always first, peace 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 would reside in our hearts also.

D. THE RICHES OF THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

1 Corinthians 1:4-9 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, 5 that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, 6 even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, 7 so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Before trying to remove the ugly blemish spots from the Corinthians' spiritual clothing, Paul recalls their strengths and blessings. Sometimes we are so bound by the problems we see in each other, that we forget that we are brothers and sisters in God's family through His grace and mercy.

If you feel that you are called to rebuke sin and correct error in the church today, consider following Paul's example. Unfortunately, the vast majority of them never encourage those who are doing wrong to do right, rather it seems they are going in for the kill.

Let's see how the apostle encourages them one at a time:

1) Genuinely Saved: The basis of gratitude is grace.

1 Corinthians 1:4 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus

In spite of our rebellion against Him, God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He continues to offer us what we need even when we rejected His hands and guidance.

2) Generously Supplied: The Corinthians had been supplied with eloquent and sound teaching by the apostle Paul.

1 Corinthians 1:5 that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge

"All utterance and all knowledge" refers to all forms of teaching and admonition – theoretical, practical, and devotional. This was the wealth of teaching and knowledge the Corinthians enjoyed under Paul and Apollos. It would be hard to top those two wonderful teachers, don't you think?

3) Securely Established: They received the Gospel without any compromise.

1 Corinthians 1:6 even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you

Confirmed means "established, made sure, stable." They were faithfully instructed to the point that they became stable in their understanding of the Gospel.

4) Spiritually Gifted

1 Corinthians 1:7a so that you come short in no gift

When it came to spiritual gifts, the Corinthians had it all.

Since we are going to study in-depth in chapter 12 and 14, I am not going to elaborate on it now, but I must clearly set a boundary of these gifts. Our spiritual gifts that we receive have absolutely nothing to do with us, rather everything to do with the gift-Giver. Whatever the spiritual gifts you have come from God the Father in heaven

for His purpose, not for you to show off. If you must show off, show off our great God.

5) Prophetically Alert

1 Corinthians 1:7b eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ
The Corinthians knew eternity was on its way. And they lived in anxious anticipation of the day when they would see His face. For this, they were better than some modern day Christians who think that everything is just fine as is and the Lord is not coming back another thousand years.

E. REMINDING THEM OF THEIR REWARDS

1 Corinthians 1:8-9 who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

After reminding the Corinthians of their riches, Paul names two rewards given them as saints. First, in eternity we will be blameless, which means “unimpeachable. God’s saints will never be indicted by either the angels or the Trinity. We will be brought into eternity blameless because of the holiness and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The second reward is for us to enjoy His fellowship through the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus while we wait. Not only will we spend eternity with Jesus, but we can enjoy fellowship with Him right now by hearing from Him through the Word of God and speaking to Him in our daily prayers.

The Corinthian Christians had their strong points, and they had their weak points. Paul praises God for their positives, and expresses confidence that God will take care of their weak points, and confirm them to the end, so that they would be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet, these positives were no great credit to the Corinthian Christians themselves. They were not the spiritual achievements of the Corinthians, but the work of the grace of God in them.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) No wrongs or weaknesses should take away our gratitude for others.

Every one of us is flawed. But rather we need to be thankful for each other. Remember, the Lord is at work in us all, removing our imperfections, until one day we all will stand spotless before Him.

2) The basis of any praiseworthy thing we have or do is God’s grace.

The Corinthians were rich only because of what God had done in their lives. Likewise, grace and grace alone has brought us where we are in Christ.

3) A rich, impressive beginning is no guarantee of the same kind of ending.

We all know the saying, “The bigger they are, the harder they fall.” The Corinthians let their spiritual wealth go to their heads and were knocked to the canvas by their own pride. As believers graciously supplied with good gifts, we need to guard our hearts with humility and always to give God the glory.

4) No degree of carnality or failure can ever remove our blameless acceptance in God's presence.

Even after trading their riches for rags, the Corinthians, remarkably, remained blameless in God's eyes. Whether you're walking with the Lord and enjoying the riches of His blessings or groveling around ragged in life's gutter, cling to the cross and hold on to His promises. He will lift you back up.