

We Share a Calling

In his introduction of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul encourages the church to grow in unity, love, as well as beliefs that are rooted in the reality of the risen Christ. Paul writes with affection, encouraging these immature believers to live up to their high calling as followers of Christ, a calling we all share.

(Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9)

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

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

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

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the word of the Lord (Congregation: *Thanks be to God*).

A novel I read in high school was titled, *The Ugly American*, about US government officials residing in a developing Southeast Asian country, who disgraced our country by their reprehensible conduct, giving a sordid image of America because of the disgraceful way they represented the US. They didn't live up to their high calling.

The word vocation comes from "calling," and whether we're retired, semi-retired or deep into a career, as followers of Christ we're expected to live up to a high calling. Mine calling as your pastor is no higher than yours. This is part of the Reformed doctrine of the priesthood of the believer. We can and must live up to our calling as people of God, called by the God of grace to be his holy people (1

& 2). We shy away from the word ‘holy’ and ‘saint,’ thinking these words describe sinless-ly perfect miracle workers or cloistered monks. But the word ‘sanctified’ simply means to be separated from the old way of life and placed into a new realm of living as God’s rescued, being remade people.

While I served as a trustee on an international mission agency, one of our unpleasant tasks was to enforce a policy for terminating missionaries who violated their commitment to Christ by some moral and spiritual downfall. The policy required that a missionary live up conduct befitting a missionary. Sadly, the enforcement of that policy resulted in the termination of the service of a number (and thankfully a small number) of missionaries.

We expect our elected officials to live up to their calling as public servants and to keep the promises they made during their campaign (although we’re becoming a little cynical about trusting these political promises to be kept, and see them more as campaign hype). We can tolerate our government leaders being less than perfect, but we expect them to try to live up to their calling as trustworthy people.

As followers of Jesus we are called out of sometimes horrendous circumstances and lifestyles to be transformed people (1 Corinthians 6: 9-11). To live up to our high calling then means a radical change of character and behavior.

When Nancy and I visited the Italian city of Florence we were told that in the 16th Century, out in the churchyard, there was a pile of broken, scrap marble from which Michelangelo would salvage chunks large enough to use to create great masterpieces. This is a great picture of what God likes to do with our lives, to pick us up from our broken, lost condition and shape us, one chisel stroke at a time, into his masterpieces (Ephesians 2:10).

In the Roman Catholic Church, some of the criteria for sainthood include at least two miracles attributed to the candidate. The New Testament speaks of only one criterion for God’s saints—having been called out of lost-ness and given the miracle of new life, experiencing transforming grace that conforms us to the likeness of Jesus Christ. And our sainthood doesn’t wait till after our mortal death. To be sanctified is to be separated from sin’s dominion the very instant you trust Christ and are given the Holy Spirit. And Paul adds that we are ‘called to be holy, *together*’ (verse 2).

My favorite cowboy television hero was The Lone Ranger, who got his name because he operated on his own, having been separated from the rest of the Texas Rangers. He had only his loyal Native American sidekick, Tonto. What a great hero he was, riding into town, solving every crime problem he ever met, riding off into the sunset anonymously with Tonto, and leaving his admiring beneficiaries asking, ‘Who was that masked man?’ The Lone Ranger was able to live and work alone, but we are called to be a part of the fellowship of the

church. We are made to depend on others, and called to live in fellowship with one another.

We are called to be part of the Body of Christ, which includes the church universal, which is also the Body of Christ. We are also to be part of a local Body of Christ that makes us accountable. The Christian life is lived out in the context of a local fellowship, meaningfully engaging one another, a holy fellowship, distinct from the world around us. We're called, not to be held in high esteem as the super spiritual, but are called simply to serve wherever God sends us.

My observation of Dale Heights Church is that it is a gifted assortment of folks who are bound together with a desire for worship, fellowship and service. Several of you have gifts of administration, worship leadership, and ministry and mercy gifts. Each one of us is given at least one spiritual gift with which to serve the Lord.

I enjoyed watching the 2014 National Football League Draft, eager to see who would be selected first and then those in the first round. The camera would show these star athletes, surrounded by friends and family, waiting by the phone to receive the call as the one next chosen, and of course, to be awarded a huge contract.

You and I are God's first choice, drafted into his eternal kingdom, to be his special, chosen "stars," masterpieces of his grace, and given a special assignment, however insignificant it may appear to you and others. In God's eyes, you're a first round draft pick, with great potential in the kingdom.

Verse 5 says we have been enriched in every way. "The Message" translation says, "Just think---you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you..."

By his grace, we can endure anything and we can fulfill his calling in every way. God calls you to serve him, and he's a considerate Master/Employer. He will not ask you to do anything without enabling you and supplying your needs for that job. You may lack formal training and job experience, but if God calls you to teach a Bible study, he will give you the resources to do a good job.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer denied himself the opportunity to flee to the US in order to oversee his small theology school for other courageous pastors who spoke out against the Nazi regime. In *Life Together* (PP 29-30), Bonhoeffer says we cannot afford to be critical of the fellowship in which God has placed us. This young German theologian and pastor, who at age 39 was executed by the Nazis, spoke against those who always longed for the fellowship enjoyed in a previous time or place, and those who always anticipated the next time and place of fellowship. The fellowship we have now is a gift of God's grace. Said Bonhoeffer,

"The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will (that) fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases"

Already I am extremely grateful for you, the people God has given to me as his gift of fellowship. And Nancy and I look forward to the days, weeks and years ahead, when our love and fellowship with and appreciation for one another grows even greater.

For this church to fulfill the task God has given us, you and I must faithfully serve in our place, whether in leadership or speaking ways, such as teaching, or in more behind-the-scene ways, such as ministries of compassionate service and encouragement. We really need each other.

During my service with a mission agency I remember a missionary sharing work in taking the gospel to an unreached people group. She related how she partnered with missionaries from a variety of sending groups and agencies to share strategy, personnel, and resources in order to cross barriers with the gospel and face obstacles in a very hostile culture.

"Over there where I serve," she explained, "every Christian looks good." We need each other. That's the way the Lord has made us.

Called people in this life are never perfect, but are different, and daily becoming more like Jesus. We are commanded to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2Peter 3: 18). You've seen signs posted at construction sites, where buildings were being erected, expanded or remodeled. These signs say something like, "Please pardon our construction/dust. We're building in order to serve you better." The Lord Jesus is pleased with us when we are undergoing perpetual construction and remodeling. He uses even the difficult experiences as part of his discipline of our lives, as he prepares us for heavenly glory. But Satan's design on us is to discourage us with a sense of our inadequacy and unworthiness.

I love a simple statement I read this week on a friend's Facebook page:
"God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called."

How good to know that God will finish what He has started within us (Philippians 1: 6)! Paul says he will ultimately make us unimpeachable, i.e. blameless.

In US history there've been two Presidents impeached by the House of Representatives. We children of grace, when we stand before Christ, will be free from the Accuser, Satan's, impeaching accusations (8). By grace alone we'll be found, not standing on our own inherent goodness or achievements, but as God's loved and forgiven children.

Although God's love is sometimes given in strange and unwelcome ways, we can trust in his loving care and purpose for us, enabling us to rejoice in our sufferings (which is not easy for me to do, BTW) because suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces hope. Hope doesn't disappoint us (Romans 5). We have the unshakable hope that God is at work through our trials to get us ready for heaven. He therefore is more interested in our holiness for eternity than in our happiness, that is, in a trouble-free life now that contributes little to holiness.

God has called us not to be simply survivors, but, as Paul says elsewhere, to be "more than conquerors." God will enable us to finally stand before him complete, with the holiness of Christ Jesus himself.

As your new pastor, I look forward to sharing with you in our journey to live up to our high calling, our real vocation, as God's kingdom people. Remember, God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called. That's us!