

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

1 CORINTHIANS 1:4-9.

I thank my God always concerning you; for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus; that in everything ye were enriched in him, in all utterance and all knowledge; even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: so that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye be unreprouvable in the clay of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

TREASURE CHRISTIANS HAVE IN THE GOSPEL

1. We have before us the opening words of the Epistle to the Corinthians, which Paul was moved to write because of unpleasant conditions in the Church at Corinth after his departure. Divisions had arisen and sad confusion prevailed in doctrine and life. Hence the apostle was constrained to rebuke their wickedness and correct their infirmities. Because of these wholesome admonitions, the reading and heeding of this epistle is not only profitable but essential to this day; for the devil takes no respite, but whenever the Gospel is preached in its purity he mixes with the children of God and sows his seed.

2. Paul intends to be rather severe – yea caustic – but he begins very leniently, showing them what they have received through the Gospel. His purpose is to arouse their gratitude to God, and to induce them, for his honor and glory, to be harmonious in doctrine and life, avoiding divisions and other offenses.

“I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus,” etc.

3. In other words, Paul would say: Dear brethren, consider, I pray you, what abundant grace and gifts have been given you of God. They are bestowed not because of the Law, or because of your righteousness, your merits and works; you are given no reason to exalt yourselves above others, or to originate sects or schisms. Nay, all these blessings have been freely given you in Christ and for his sake, through the preaching of the Gospel. The Gospel is a grace which brings to you all manner of gifts, by him enriching you in everything. You lack nothing from God, but you await this one thing, that blessed day

when Christ will reveal himself to you with all those heavenly gifts which you now possess in faith.

4. In this wise he extols to them the preaching of the Gospel (as indeed he does on different occasions); his purpose is to induce them to regard it most appreciatively. He gives them an example of his own gratitude, thanking God on their behalf, for the purpose of calling forth their especial gratitude when they should consider what they formerly were and what they now had received through the Gospel. And again, he would have them beware lest, forgetful of their former misery and present grace, they relapse into their old blindness. A sad beginning in such backsliding had been made by factions in their midst, who, satiated with the Gospel and indifferent to the abundant grace they enjoyed, began to cast about for something else.

5. Now observe: If the exalted apostle and venerable teacher of the Gentiles in his day had to witness in his own parish such factions and sects as those which, in sinful security and ingratitude toward the Gospel, arose during his life, what wonder is it that today, when we do not have the excellent preachers and pious Christians of those times, there are similar sects? We are aware of the great benefits bestowed upon us, but at the same time we see and realize that the devil instigates divisions and scandals. And the cause of these evils may be traced to our ingratitude; we have quickly forgotten the ills we endured under the blindness of popery, and how miserably we were deluded and tormented. Necessarily, where God's mercies are lightly dismissed from the mind and disregarded, gratitude and regard for God's Word cannot be the result; satiated, listless Christians go their way fancying that spiritual conditions always were and always will be as now.

6. The people, therefore, must be awakened to consider their former destitution, the very wretchedness they were in. The apostle later on vividly pictures such condition to his Corinthians, while here, in the opening chapter, he intimates to them, in kind and courteous words, to consider, in the light of the Gospel benefits they now enjoy, what they lacked before and might be deprived of again.

7. Therefore he says, You now have received the grace whereby in everything ye are enriched. Formerly you had not this grace and would not have it today had not the Gospel been preached to you. You are enriched in everything pertaining to yonder life, for it is not the purpose of the Gospel to give earthly riches. But in spiritual blessings ye come behind in no gift and have need of naught except this one thing, that the Lord himself should come. This blessing you are yet to have, and biding its advent you here live by the gifts and grace with which you were enriched, until you are finally redeemed from the sinful, wicked life of the world and from all its oppressions. You must know, and must thank God for it, that you need not seek after any higher calling or better gifts, thinking you have not all that is essential, as the factious spirits would have you believe.

8. For in your own judgment, what better thing could you have than is the Christian's in his Gospel and his faith? He has assurance of sins forgiven and washed away in holy baptism, of justification and holiness before God, and of the fact that he is God's child and heir to eternal life. Furthermore, although the Christian is conscious of remaining weakness and sin, yea, although he be overcome by a fault, he may avail himself of absolution, comfort and strength through his fellow Christians and by the aid of the sacraments; and he has daily guidance for his conduct and faith in all the walks of life. Again, he can call upon God in prayer in the day of trouble, and the firm assurance is his that God will hear and help him. What further can one desire, or what more does he need, than the knowledge that he is God's child through baptism and has God's Word at hand for comfort and strength in weakness and sin? Do you consider it slight enrichment to have assurance of the fact that God himself is speaking to you and, by means of the office of the ministry, is effective in you, teaching, admonishing, comforting, sustaining you, yea, granting you victory over the devil, death and all evil influences on earth?

9. Formerly what would we not gladly have given and done for but a single Gospel truth in our distress and trials of conscience! True, when one was discouraged or perplexed he was advised to seek and follow the counsel of some intelligent and judicious mind; but such judicious one who might assist with his counsel was nowhere to be found. For a wise man's counsel does not answer in such case. The Word of God alone suffices, and you are to rely on it as if God himself revealed his counsel to you from heaven.

10. As Paul says, it is great riches, a precious treasure, to possess in very fact the Word of God and not to doubt that it is the Word of God. It is this that will answer; this can comfort your heart and support it. Of spiritual benefits you know we had none under the tyranny and darkness of the Pope. At that time we suffered ourselves to be led and driven by his commandments, vain human baubles, by bulls, lies, invocation of saints, indulgences, masses, monkery. And we did whatever was enjoined in the name of the Church, solely to gain comfort and help, that we might not despair of God's grace. But instead of comforting us, these things led us to the devil and thrust us into greater anguish and terror; for there was nothing in the doctrine of the papists that could give us certainty. Indeed, they themselves had to confess that by its teachings no man could or should be certain of his state of grace.

11. Yea, they forced poor, timid, tempted hearts to dread and fear Christ more than the devil even, as! myself experienced full well. I resorted to the dead – St. Barbara, St. Ann and other departed saints – regarding them as mediators between me and Christ's wrath. But this availed me nothing, nor did it free me from a fearful and fugitive conscience. There was not one among us all – and we were called very learned doctors of Holy Writ – who could have given true comfort from God's Word, saying: This is God's Word; this one thing God asks of you, that you honor him by accepting comfort; believe and know that he forgives your transgressions and has no wrath against you. If someone could have told me this, I would have given all I possessed for the knowledge; yea, for such word of

comfort I would not have taken in exchange the glory and the crowns of all kings, for it would have restored my soul, it would have refreshed and sustained my body and life.

12. All this we should bear in mind, by no means should we forget it; that we may return thanks to God, recounting the superior and wonderful gifts which have enriched us in all things. We have besides the Word, free prayer and the Lord's Prayer, knowing what to pray for and how to pray – knowledge common to the very children today, thank God. In former times, all men, especially we monks, tormented themselves with lengthy repetitions in reading and singing; yet our prayers were but chattering, as the noise of geese over their food, or of monks repeating a psalm.

13. I, too, wanted to be a pious and godly monk and I prepared with earnest devotion for mass and for prayers. But when most devout! went to the altar a doubter and left the altar a doubter. When I had rendered my confession I still doubted, and I doubted when! did not render it. For we were wholly wrapped up in the erroneous idea that we could not pray and would not be heard unless we were absolutely dean and without sin, like the saints in heaven. It would have been much better not to pray at all and to have done something else, than thus to take God's name in vain. Still, we monks – in fact all the ecclesiastics – eluded the people, promising them our prayers for their money and possessions, actually selling our prayers, though we did not even know that we prayed in a manner acceptable to God. But today, thank God, we do know and understand, not only what to pray for and how to approach God "*nothing doubting*," but we can also add a hearty Amen, believing that according to his promise he will certainly hear us.

THE CHRISTIAN'S TREASURE.

14. The Christian has indeed inestimable treasure. In the first place he has the testimony of the Word of God, which is the word of eternal grace and comfort, that he has a right and true conception of baptism, the Lord's Supper, the Ten Commandments and the Creed. In addition he has the sure refuge of God's promise to deliver us from every trouble in which we shall call upon him, and to give us, as he promised by the prophet Zechariah 12:10, the Spirit of grace and of prayer. And the Christian, by virtue of his enlightened understanding, can wisely discern what are good works and what callings are pleasing to God; on the other hand, his judgment is equally true as to unprofitable and vain works and false services. Before, we had not this wholesome knowledge. We knew not what we believed, or how we prayed and lived. We sought comfort and salvation in self-devised trivialities, in penances, confessions and satisfactions, in self-righteous works of monkery and in obedience to the commands of the Pope. We believed such works to be fully satisfactory and, indeed, the only things that were holy; the pursuits of common Christians we considered worldly and dangerous.

15. In illustration of this idea, a picture was exhibited – with the sanction of the Pope – representing a great ship in the wild, wide sea, containing only the holy monks and the

super-holy popes, cardinals, bishops, etc., who were throwing their merits to those in peril struggling in the water, or extending a hand, or by means of ropes and their stoles drawing the drowning to safety in the boat.

16. In contrast to this darkness, consider the priceless and to-be-cherished blessing of knowing with certainty wherein the heart is to take comfort, how to seek help in distress and how to conduct one's self in one's own station. If, though provided with spiritual riches on all sides, you are not sufficient of yourself at all times to grasp them, you can, nevertheless, always reach and appropriate them by means of the ordinary ministry and office of the Church, yes, by the aid of your fellow-Christians. Again, it is productive of the greatest happiness to know that when living aright in the ordinary walks of life established by God, you are more acceptable and pleasing to him than you would be to purchase the works and merits of all the monks and hermits.

17. What Paul terms being "enriched," first, "in all utterance," or knowledge – which, in the exalted spiritual meaning of the words, bears on life everlasting – is having the comfort of faith in Christ and of invocation and prayer. And enriched in "all knowledge," means having true conception and right judgment in all things of our physical life and in all our earthly relations. All things that a Christian should know and should possess are comprehended in these two terms. These blessings are gifts and treasures indescribably great. He who will contrast them with the destitution of our former condition cannot but be joyful and thankful. I remember the time when I, engaged in earnest study of Holy Writ, would have given a great deal for the right exposition of a psalm; and when had I but begun to understand a verse aright, I would have been as rejoiced as if born to life anew.

18. Truly, then, we should now render to God heartfelt thanks for the great favor and blessing of restored light and understanding in Scripture, and the right conception of doctrinal matters. But, alas! it is likely to be with us as with the Corinthians, who had received most abundantly from Paul but by way of return had made ill use of it and proved shamefully unthankful. And they met with retribution, the worst of it being false doctrine and seductions, until at last that grand congregation was wholly ruined and destroyed. A similar retribution threatens us, yes, is before the door with appalling knock, in the instance of the Turks and in other distress and calamity. For this reason we should, with a thankful heart and serious mind, pray, as Paul here does for his Corinthians, that God would keep us steadfast in the possession of his gifts and blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

19. Paul admonishes us to continue in this knowledge and appreciation of the grace and gifts of God. Since by these blessings we have received riches and happiness to the satisfying of all our need, the apostle further admonishes us to look only for the Lord to reveal to us publicly by his coming that which he has promised and through faith already granted us.

20. In the past, much has been written and ingeniously devised on the topic of preparing for death and the final judgment. But it has only served to further confuse timid consciences. For these comforters were not able to show anything of the comfort to be found in the riches of grace and bliss in Christ. They directed the people to oppose with their own works and good life, death and God's judgment. In place of this delusion is now evident the precious truth; he who knows the Gospel doctrines, goes on and performs his own work and duty in his respective calling. He takes comfort in the fact that through baptism he is engrafted into Christ; he receives absolution and partakes of the holy supper for the strengthening of his faith, commending his soul and body to Christ. Why should such a one fear death? Though it come at any time, in form of pestilence or accident, it will always find the Christian ready and well prepared, be he awake or asleep; for he is in Christ Jesus.

21. For all these things the Christian may well thank and bless God, realizing that he has no further need, nor can he gain anything better than he already has in the remission of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the faithful prosecution of his calling; however, he should remain in, and daily grow in, faith and supplication. But he cannot hope to attain to another and better doctrine, faith, Spirit, prayer, sacrament, reward, etc., than had all the saints, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, or in fact than has now every Christian that is baptized. Therefore I need not idly spend time in trying to prepare people for death and inspire them with courage by such commonplaces as recalling and relating the innumerable daily accidents, ills and dangers of this life. This method will not answer; death will not thereby be frightened away, nor will the fear of death be removed. The Gospel teaching is: Believe in Christ, pray and live in accordance with God's Word, and then, when death overtakes and attacks you, you will know that you are Christ the Lord's. Paul says (Romans 14:8): "*Whether we live... or die, we are the Lord's.*" Indeed, we Christians live upon this earth to the very end that we may have assured comfort, salvation and victory over death and hell.

22. Of this Paul here reminds us, and dwells on it more fully later in this Epistle; he would have us duly thankful for this great grace and living among ourselves in a Christian and brotherly manner, in doctrine and practice, ignoring and avoiding that wild, disorderly conduct of the contentious and disorderly. He who recognizes such grace and blessing cannot but love and thank God and conduct himself aright toward his neighbor; and when he finds himself falling short in this he will, by admonition and the Word of God, make amends.

23. Here you might put the question: Why does Paul speak in such a commendatory way of the Corinthians, saying that they were enriched in everything and came behind in no gift, when he himself confesses later on that they had contentions and schisms – in regard to baptism, to the sacrament, to the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and in regard to abuse of liberty, and some lived as they pleased. Would you not call these things faults

and shortcomings? How, then, is he in a position to say that they were abundantly supplied with all things spiritual, lacking not one thing?

24. Well, you should recall what I have repeatedly stated: Christendom is never so spotless that there are not some spurious and wicked admixed, just as you will always find weeds, darnel, tares, or wild mustard together with pure grain. And he who will examine the Church with only a view of finding faults and frailties among those called Christians, will miss the Church, yes, the Gospel and Christ, and never discover a Church at all.

25. But we have the consolation of knowing that if we have the Gospel pure, we have the treasure God gives his Church and we cannot go astray nor want. But as yet we have not reached that degree of perfection where all hearers of the Gospel will grasp it fully and wholly or are faultless in faith and life; at all times there will be some who do not believe and some who are weak and imperfect. However, that great treasure and rich blessing of doctrine and knowledge is present. There is no defect in this, and it is effective and fruitful. The fact that some do not believe, does not weaken baptism or the Gospel or the Church; they only harm themselves.

To sum up, where the Word remains, there most assuredly is also the Church. For wherever the doctrine is pure, there you can also keep purity in baptism, the sacrament, absolution, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, good works and all callings; and wherever you find a defect or an irregularity, you can admonish, amend and rectify by means of the Word.

26. Some there must be who have the Word and sacraments pure and unadulterated, who have faith, pray aright, keep God's commandments and do other things, as, thank God, we have with us. Then we may firmly conclude: If the true Church were not here, these characteristics would be lacking; therefore we must have among ourselves true members of the Church and true saints. Now even though children of the world intermingle (as will be the case always and in all places), who show neither faith nor a godly life, it would corrupt neither faith, nor baptism, nor doctrine, nor would the Church perish on that account – the treasure remains in its integrity and efficacy, and God may graciously cause some to turn from their unbelief and wicked life and be added to the faithful and to mend their ways.

27. Again, they with whom this treasure – the Word or doctrine and its knowledge – is not found, cannot be the Christian Church nor members of it, and for that reason they cannot pray or believe aright or do good works pleasing to God. It follows that their whole lives are in God's sight lost and condemned, though they may assiduously extol God and the Church and before the world may have the appearance and reputation of leading particularly holy lives and excelling even the upright Christians in virtues and honor. It is a settled fact that outside the Church of Christ there is no God, no grace, no bliss; as Paul says (Ephesians 4:5): "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and

Father of all,” etc. And Acts 4:12 says: *“And in none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved.”*

28. And so Paul, when here extolling the Corinthians, has not an eye to the contentious, the Epicureans, or to those who give public offense, as the man that “had his father’s wife;” but the apostle looks to the fact that a few remain who have the pure Word of God, faith, baptism and the sacrament, though some hypocrites be among them. Because of these few – and few indeed there may be – we recognize the presence of that inestimable treasure of which the apostle speaks. It is found as well where two or three are gathered together as with thousands. Neither the Gospel nor the ministers nor the Church is to be blamed that the multitude miss this treasure; the multitude have but them, selves to blame, for they close their ears and eyes.

29. Now behold how loftily Paul has extolled and how beautifully portrayed the Christian Church – where she is to be found on earth and what inestimable blessings and gifts she has received of Christ, for which she is in duty bound to thank and praise him in her confession and in her life. This subject the apostle concludes with the words: *“God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

30. The good work which Christ has begun in you and already assured to you, he will without fail establish in you until the end and for ever, if you but do not fall away through unbelief, or cast grace from you. For his Word or promise given to you, and his work begun in you, are not changeable as is man’s word and work, but are firm, certain, divine, immovable truth. Since you are in possession of this your divine calling, draw comfort therefrom and rely on it without wavering. Amen.

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