Thank God for the Church

A sermon delivered by Michael Cheuk, Senior Minister, University Baptist Church, Charlottesville, Va., on October 21, 2012.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

There once was a church where the pastor and the music minister were not getting along. As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. After that sermon, the music minister led in the hymn “I Shall Not Be Moved.” The second week, the pastor preached on tithing and how we should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The music minister responded with the hymn “Jesus Paid It All.” The third week, the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. Afterwards, the music minister led in the singing of “I Love to Tell the Story.” The preacher became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday he told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The music minister followed that announcement with “Soon and Very Soon.” The next week, the pastor did resign from the church and said that it was Jesus who was taking him away. And the music minister ended the service with the hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

Thank God for University Baptist Church that we don’t have this kind of conflict here! But we hear stories of church conflicts all the time. In fact, at the church that Paul founded in Corinth, there were controversies brewing over how to deal with a sex scandal and which church leader to follow. At the church in Corinth, members were suing each other in public courts, richer members were receiving preferential treatment during the celebration of the common meal, and some members looked down on others because they did not exhibit certain gifts of the Spirit. The church in Corinth was a mess, and for most people, there was not much to give thanks about.
It was to this mess of a church that Paul began his letter with “I always thank my God for you.” Was Paul kidding? Thank God for the Church in Corinth? Was he just writing this as a formality? After all, letters in the ancient world usually included a thanksgiving after the greeting. As we continue to read this passage, we find that Paul was genuine and sincere in his thanks. “I always thank my God for you,” Paul writes, “because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.” Notice that Paul did not write, “I always thank my God for you because you are the perfect church and you get along with one another.” No, Paul’s thanksgiving was based not on how good the church was, but how gracious Jesus Christ is. Thank God for the Church because of the grace of Jesus Christ.

Grace is the undeserved mercy, the unmerited favor that God has showered upon humanity. God’s grace was shown most vividly by the sending of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sin so that we may receive the gift of abundant and eternal life. But another way that the grace of God has been shown is by the enriching of the church with spiritual gifts. Paul writes: “For in him (Christ Jesus) you have been enriched in every way.” When Paul uses the word “you” in these verses, he is using the plural form to address the whole church community. If Paul were from the South, he would have said, “For in Christ Jesus, y’all have been enriched in every way.” If Paul were from New Jersey, he would have said, “Hey, ‘yous guys’ do not lack any spiritual gift.” Paul was telling the church in Corinth that even though some of their members think that they have a special spiritual gift of speaking in tongues or a special gift of wisdom over other members, because of the grace of Christ, the church as a whole has been enriched in every way with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge. Yes, some in the Church of Corinth were highly educated, while many others were uneducated and illiterate, but all of them were saved by grace and not by knowledge. By grace the church as a whole has been enriched in every way.

In the first half of the 2003-2004 NFL season, the New England Patriots were a surprising success. Despite using eight rookies to replace injured veterans, the Patriots led the AFC Eastern division, with a 7-2 record. Part of their success was due to an unselfish mindset adopted by coaches and players alike. The vice
president of player personnel, Scott Pioli, displayed a sign in his office that summarized it best. The sign read, “WE ARE BUILDING A TEAM—NOT COLLECTING TALENT.” That team went on to win Super Bowl 38 and their string of consecutive victories continued into the 2004-2005 season. That group of players established an NFL record of twenty-one straight wins, by putting team above talent.

The Church of Jesus Christ is about building a team, not collecting talent. There is a lot of talent among the membership of University Baptist Church. But I also believe that there are a lot of unused gifts among the membership also. Thank God for the Church because it is gifted by God, who will provide all that we need if we act as a team, with all members doing their part.

While God has enriched the church with all necessary gifts in the present, the full blossoming of those gifts will only be revealed in the future. The church has every spiritual gift she needs but she has not yet arrived at perfection because Christ has not yet returned. Salvation has fully come to us by the cross of Christ, but sanctification is a life-long process toward the holiness of God. That’s why we eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed on the last day when we will finally be made perfect. In the meantime, Paul assures the church that “God will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” In other words, what God started in the church, God will assuredly bring to completion. Thank God for the Church because it is kept by God.

Several years back, when I was the Associate Minister of Youth here at University Baptist, I was warned about a group of boys who would be graduating up into the youth group that fall. They had a reputation of being, shall I say, “energetic,” and I must say, their reputation was well earned. But as I got to know them better, I could see the gifts that God had given them. As the years passed by, through patience and love—more from their parents than from me—these young men grew and blossomed into more of what God intended them to be. Now, are they perfect
and blameless today? Certainly not, but they have come a long way from their spasmodic, unruly, 12-year-old selves. And God is faithful and will keep them firm to the end.

I thank God for the Church who can see people not only for who they are, but for who they are becoming in Christ. I still remember when I was a shy and quiet twelve-year old boy being baptized at First Baptist Church, Shreveport, LA. After the baptism service, Alex Rice, a deacon and a big, burly man, looked down on me with a smile and said, “Michael, I see that God has special plans for you. Serve Him well.” At the time, I had no idea of what he meant, but now, I realize that he didn’t see me for who I was, but he saw me for who I could be in Christ! Am I perfect and blameless today? Absolutely not! But I pray that every day, I am becoming more of who God has made me to be in Christ.

Right now, I invite you to look around this sanctuary and take note of the people here. You will see some friends and people you enjoy spending time with, and thank God for those people. And if you’re honest, you will also see people who, frankly, get on your nerves and push your buttons. And if Jesus were to lead them to another church, you too might be tempted to sing, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” But on this Sunday, you’re invited to see these people in the same way Paul saw the Church in Corinth: as graced by Christ, gifted by the Spirit, and kept by God until they are perfect and blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus. See them not only for who they are, but for who they are becoming in Christ. As you see these people in this light, you may also come to realize that God has placed them in your life in order to help and train you to be perfect and blameless!

The Church is made up of flawed and imperfect people, but saved by the grace of Christ, sanctified by the Spirit and called to be God’s holy people. So hear the Good News this morning. Thank God for the Church, not because we are perfect, but because God is perfect. Thank God for the Church, not because we are blameless, but because Christ is blameless. Thank God for the Church, not because we are fruitful, but because God is faithful, who has called us into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
I’ll end with a poem attributed to Mavis Williams. It’s called “The Perfect Church.”

If you should find the perfect church
Without one fault or smear,
For goodness sake! Don’t join that church;
You’d spoil the atmosphere.

If you should find the perfect church
Where all anxieties cease
Then pass it by, lest joining it
You’d mar the masterpiece.

If you should find the perfect church
Then don’t you ever dare,
To tread upon such holy ground;
You’d be a misfit there.

But since no perfect church exists
Made of imperfect men,
Then let’s cease looking for that church
And love the church we’re in.

Of course, it’s not a perfect church,
That’s simple to discern
But you and I and all of us
Could cause the tide to turn.
What fools we are to flee our post
In that unfruitful search
To find at last where problems loom
God proudly builds His church.

So let’s keep working in our church
Until the resurrection.
And then we each will join that church
Without an imperfection.
I thank God for the Church because of God’s grace given us in Christ Jesus!
I thank God for you. Amen.