

Until He Comes, Be Faithful!

A sermon based on 1 Corinthians 1:3-9.

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

The wedding ring, do you remember what this symbolizes? The never-ending love husband and wife have for each other, the promise to be faithful to each other “as long as we both shall live.”

The promises don't usually start then, though, do they? The engagement ring, we promise we're going to get married to each other. In some cases, there's even a promise ring. Ladies, have any of you ever received a promise ring? Why? What purpose did it serve? Right, really to bridge the gap until the engagement ring is purchased, kind of like “I promise to make the promise we're going to get married and make the promise to be faithful to each other.”

You know, why all this talk about rings, about marriage, about wedding days? Advent is the time leading up to Christmas, the birth of Jesus, right? Well, yes, but it's not the only event Advent leads up to. It's also preparing us for Christ to come back again...when he returns to take us to the wedding feast of the Lamb. And what do we want to look like when he comes? How do we want to be living when he comes? Well, we want to be found acceptable. We want to go there with him. And what he wants? This...until he comes, be faithful.

You know, there's a different kind of promise ring that can be given, one not quite as familiar (at least I don't think it is, but maybe that's just me being a guy). It's called the purity ring. Have you ever heard of that? *I see some of your heads shaking yes.* Maybe some of you've even had one of those. For those of you who have, what's the purpose of those rings? A lot of times, purity rings are given to daughters by parents to remind them what a special gift it is to remain pure until they're married and can give themselves and their purity to their future husband as a gift.

Paul's “purity ring” to the Corinthians believers was this...his letter to them. Their future husband, Jesus, was coming (they didn't know when exactly), and there was no better gift they would be able to give to him than their purity, or, as Paul calls it here, being “blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which, again, was referring to when Jesus returns.

To remain blameless...that's what Paul wanted for the Corinthians. He wanted them to keep themselves and their lives pure like a virgin so on their “wedding day” they could lovingly look at Jesus and say, “Here Jesus! I've kept myself pure for you.”

Paul also knew, though, how much of a struggle that would be for them. While they were eagerly waiting for “our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed,” as Paul writes here, they were, at the same time, struggling to remain blameless, faultless, sinless, pure. If you read on in 1 Corinthians, you'd see. Here, Paul addresses issues of moral delinquency, misuse of Christian freedom, false doctrine, divisions and fighting within the congregation, sexual immorality, amongst other problems.

But, before he even touches any of that, we have these words today, a section of 1 Corinthians with the non-inspired heading of “Thanksgiving.”

You see what Paul's thankful for here? Above anything else, the grace of God. That undeserved love given...gifted to them by Jesus...through Jesus. And that grace, that love was now enriching their lives...their speaking (having a desire to share that love of Jesus), their knowledge (having a desire to grow in God's Word), their spiritual gifts (having a desire to live for Jesus), the way they were now waiting for Jesus to return.

That grace...Paul's testimony about that grace...he was seeing that confirmed in them. The image behind that word, confirmed, is that of a strong root or a secure anchor. What Paul and his co-workers testified concerning Christ had taken firm hold in his readers. Paul was confident it would continue to hold. And with the firm grip that God's grace and the good news of God's grace had on them, Paul could rightly ask and expect for them to remain pure...that until Jesus comes, they would be faithful.

Friends, Jesus is coming. That's what the word Advent means, "he comes." That's what the season of Advent is about, preparing for Jesus to come. He's coming as a child at Christmas, yes, but for us, over 2000 years after his birth, we're focused more on his second coming, as our Bridegroom, to get his bride, the Church, you and me, to take us home.

How's he going to find you? Will he find you wearing your "purity ring," having remained pure, being blameless, being faithful to him?

How about with your speaking? Think about what you say, the words that come out of your mouth. A word of disrespect against your boss, your parent, your teacher, your governor/president takes away the purity, doesn't it? Words spoken in a moment of anger to your spouse, your friend, your sibling, your co-worker takes away the purity, doesn't it? Words spoken as you betray confidences or purposely or even accidentally keep the rumor tree growing takes away the purity, doesn't it? The words you speak taking God's name in vain, whether it's the casual "Oh my God!" or the inanimate objects or people you're asking God to condemn to hell, the swear word which has somehow found its way into your regular vocabulary...takes away the purity, doesn't it?

Think about what you don't say, the words that should be coming out of your mouth. Words that should be spoken in defense of those who cannot defend themselves, either because they're not there or they're too timid to speak...takes away the purity, doesn't it? Words that should be spoken to build up another's reputation rather than tearing it down takes away the purity, doesn't it? The most important words that could be spoken, the life-giving message of the gospel, but they don't come out when they should, doesn't that take away the purity, too?

How about when it comes to your knowledge? You know, the Corinthians, these Greeks Paul was writing to, they put such a great emphasis on gaining knowledge and being able to speak eloquently. They were part of this Greek culture which held philosophy in such high regard.

But it wasn't this worldly, philosophical kind of knowledge Paul wanted them to treasure. Neither does he want that for you. Have you put more effort into becoming a history buff but struggle to work your way through salvation history? Are you big on reading these self-help books and magazine articles but not so much when it comes to reading the God-helps-you book, the Bible? Do you enjoy reading books by your favorite author, but you find yourself somewhat apathetic when it comes to reading the Book by the Author of salvation? Has spending five minutes a day finding your horoscope become more

important than spending five minutes a day finding what God has to say about your past, present, and future because of Christ?

What kind of knowledge are you filling up on? Where are you planting your roots...setting your anchor? Are you missing out on the knowledge you need?

How about with your spiritual gifts? You know the different gifts, the talents, the abilities, God has gifted to you. I see them in you. But there's a difference between being aware of them and actually putting them to use.

In another of his letters, to the Romans, Paul said this, ***"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."*** Maybe some of those are your gifts. Maybe you have others. But his point is clear. You have the gift, you use it. So, do you?

Looking at all this, your speaking, your knowledge, your spiritual gifts, we don't even need to delve into other areas of your life, do we? This right here is enough to show us we aren't blameless, we aren't pure, we haven't remained faithful to Jesus. And when Jesus comes, instead of eagerly waiting, we should rightly expect what Isaiah wrote about in our 1st Lesson, ***"All of us have become like on who is unclean...when we continued to sin...you were angry...you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins."*** And that should be our eternity.

Until he comes, we ought to be faithful. We aren't. And in spite of all of that, Paul's words of thanksgiving here are for you as well. You heard me right. Paul thanks God for you. And it's not because you're faithful.

These Corinthians, who were often so careless about distinguishing between right and wrong, who were so self-centered, who were so sure of themselves, needed to reread what Paul writes in the introduction to his letter. He didn't praise the exercise of their faith. He didn't commend them for their deeds of love and for their Christian service. He didn't praise them for their Christian knowledge. And he doesn't do that for you and me, either.

That's not what Paul says here, is it? Paul thanks God for you because ***"God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."*** It's because until Jesus comes, God is faithful!

And there's no greater example of God's faithfulness than Jesus. The book of Philippians tells us, ***"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son..."*** In other words, when the time was just right, God kept his promise. The promise God had made already way back in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve, to send the One who would crush Satan's head and destroy his power, he remained faithful to that promise in Jesus.

Jesus, who was blameless; even his enemies couldn't prove him guilty of sin. Jesus, who gave you grace, his undeserved love and forgiveness and righteousness when he remained faithful to God's plan and died for you on the cross, to take away your sins. Jesus, who rose in order to secure your victory and guarantee you are blameless in God's sight.

And now, you have fellowship with him. You know what that means? You share with Jesus. You share in his grace and peace...the peace of forgiveness and the peace of knowing your eternal future is secure.

And until Jesus comes, God is faithful to you...and it's all because of Jesus. Look through these seven verses and count the number of times Jesus is referenced. 6 times (and if you add in the first two verses of 1 Corinthians, that number jumps to 9 times in nine verses.

Clearly, Paul wants the focus to be Jesus. God is faithful to you because of Jesus. God gives you his grace because of Jesus. There's peace between you and God because of Jesus. You have been enriched in every way because of Jesus. You will be blameless and pure when Jesus returns because of Jesus. You will be kept strong in your faith in Jesus til the end because of Jesus. Now you can eagerly wait for Jesus to be revealed because of Jesus. And now you too can be faithful to God...only because of Jesus.

You know, this makes his command, ***"be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life"*** easier for us to follow, because Jesus is faithful...he keeps us faithful!

God wants us to be faithful as we wait for Jesus...he makes us that way. And our response? We remain faithful...in our speaking, in our knowledge, in the use of our spiritual gifts, in our entire lives. And when Jesus comes, we can say, "Jesus, I've been eagerly waiting for you. Here I am, blameless. You've kept me pure for yourself. You've kept me faithful! Thanks be to you!"

And he will give us the symbol of his unending love...not a wedding ring, but a crown...the crown of eternal life. That's his promise to us. And he'll remain faithful. Thanks be to him! Amen.