

I want you to use your imagination this morning. Imagine being a tourist – you are traveling around the world, you have to spend the night in a certain city. And so you get there, you check into your hotel, and then you decide to look around. As you walk around, you realize that this is a very industrial city, lots of shipbuilding going on. That makes sense since this city is right on the coast. You see that this city is booming economically – lots of products being shipped in and out. It's very cosmopolitan and multi-cultural. You walk by people from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds, all kinds of walks of life. You see soldiers, politicians, sailors, businessmen, slaves. At the end of the street you see a big stadium – this city well known for its passion for sports.

You look up, and at the top of a hill, you see a huge building. You ask someone what that building is, and they tell you that it's a temple to the local god. You find out that their version of religion is very immoral – over 1000 prostitutes work in that temple, and to go there and to be with a prostitute was considered an act of worship in that city. You find out that the whole city is very immoral, that drunkenness and immorality were standard ways of life.

And then, to your surprise, you find out that there is a church in this city – a group of Christians that believe the same things as you. It's a brand new church, and they're struggling – that doesn't surprise you because of the city in which they live. They invite you to come and visit with them, and so you do.

While you are there, someone bursts through the door and holds up a letter. It's from the Apostle Paul, the man who started their church. Where are you? You are in the first-century city of Corinth. The city that I described to you this morning really did exist, and it had many similarities to our world today. And those Christians living there had many of the same temptations, same struggles, same challenges that we Christians have today.

This morning, I want you to imagine that you are one of those people, because really, in many ways, you are. That letter they received from the Apostle Paul is also written to you. His words of encouragement to them, are also words of encouragement for you today. As we focus on this letter – the first nine verses – you're going to find out that Christianity, no matter if you're living in first-century Corinth, or in 21st century America – Christianity is the best kind of life there is. For three reasons: 1) Because of who you are. 2) Because of what you have. And finally, 3) Because of what will happen.

Paul starts the letter by reminding the people that he is an Apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. As an Apostle, he was God's messenger – what he writes here is not just his own ideas, but the very words of God. In verse 2, he says: "to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy." The word sanctified means to be set apart as holy. Doesn't that seem strange that Paul would talk about these people that way? Is Paul saying that these are a holy bunch of people? It sure sounds that way: "to those called to be holy." Later in verse 8 he describes these people as "blameless." How can that be? As you read this letter, you find out that these people are anything but holy – they had all kinds of problems. How in the world can Paul call these people holy?

Because that's exactly what they are! Did you know that? Did you know that every Christian is holy in the eyes of God, blameless in the eyes of God. When God looks at you, he sees you and says, "You are holy." How can that be? Do you think you're holy? Raise your hand right now if you didn't make any mistakes this past week. Who

here in the last seven days never said a bad word, never did a bad thing, never even had a bad thought? Who here this past week was not selfish, even for a second? Can anyone here honestly say that they are holy and blameless?

If not, then the Word of God must be wrong! Because here, God says that these Corinthian Christians, and you, are holy and blameless. God must not know us very well! Actually, he does know us very well, doesn't he. He sees every mistake we make. He hears every word we speak. And it's scary to think about, but true – he even knows every thought that we have. God knows that we aren't holy, but quite the opposite. He knows that because of the way we are, the way we think and act, we deserve to be punished, to be thrown away from his presence forever.

But God still calls us holy! How? It's because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. He has made us holy. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into this world, and while he was here, he took all of our mistakes, all of those words and deeds and thoughts we shouldn't have – Jesus took all those sins, and put them on himself. And then, he allowed God the Father to punish him for our sins. That's why Jesus died on the cross – to be the Lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world, to make us holy.

Because of what Jesus Christ has done, God can look at each one of you, and say, you are holy. Not because of how great you are. But because Jesus has taken all of your sins away. That's why Christianity is the greatest life there is – through Jesus Christ, God forgives us, calls us holy – all of our sins have been taken away!

I had a white shirt that will never be clean. I don't know what the problem was – that tomato sauce I spilled on that shirt must be toxic, because it refused to come out. The shirt was permanently ruined because of that stain. Isn't that how we sometimes feel about our lives? I have stained my life with my mistakes! Because of my past, I have permanently ruined my life! Not true! This morning, we are reminded why being a Christian is the best kind of life there is. As a Christian, you find out that no matter what the mistake, no matter what the sin – Jesus has washed it away. Because of Jesus, God forgives you, and calls you holy and blameless. So, cheer up! You are worthwhile and special. You are holy and blameless in the sight of God.

Paul goes on to say: "I always thank God for you, because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him, you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge." There is a second reason why being a Christian is the best kind of life there is – you are enriched in every way. Later Paul says: "You do not lack any spiritual gift." That small group of Christians in Corinth had it all, according to God's Word here. As they taught the Word of God, as they listened and grew in their faith, they lacked nothing.

Sometimes small, new churches suffer from low self-esteem. If you're in a small church like ours, it's easy to focus on what you don't have. "We don't have a giant outdoor screen for outside worship services like Live Oaks. We don't have a Christian Day School, and a lot of young families. We don't have a Christian contemporary band. Oh, why can't we have what the big church down the street has. Poor us! We have nothing!" But the Word of God says: "You do not lack any spiritual gift." Sure, we don't have a lot of bells and whistles here, but those are little things. The big things, the important things – Open Bible does not lack any spiritual gift. As a member of Open Bible, you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge. Look at the people around you – they seem like regular, ordinary people. But

this morning, God's Word tells you that you are anything but ordinary. Spiritually, you are a very rich group of people. I see the love of Jesus pouring out from all of you. I love the membership of Open Bible. You lack nothing – God has given to you everything you need to grow and mature in your faith.

Really, that's what church is all about, isn't it? The bells and whistles are nice, but when you get right down to it – aren't you here because you want to grow your soul? Aren't you here because you want to learn more about the God who made you? The God who saved you by sending his Son? Aren't you here because you want to grow closer to this God, and learn how you can better serve him with your life? Isn't that why you're here? My friends, it is true that Open Bible is small and new, but spiritually, you are rich in every way. You do not lack any spiritual gift. You have been given special abilities by the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of Christ's church. You are talented. You are gifted. That's why being a Christian is the best kind of life there is – because of what we have, which is everything.

The last reason listed here - why being a Christian is the best kind of life there is... The Apostle Paul goes on to say: "Our Lord Jesus Christ will be revealed" – he's talking about Judgment Day. "He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Right now, because of Jesus, you are blameless in the eyes of God. And God will strengthen you and keep you in your faith until Judgment Day. How can you be so sure? "God who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord is faithful." God always makes good on his promises. He is faithful, and that's why being a Christian is the best kind of life there is. You know what's going to happen in your future!

Do you realize how unusual that is? I don't care who you are, no one knows what's going to happen in the future. Think about your money situation – what will it be like when you retire? You have no clue. You're trying to be careful with your money now, which is good. People who worked for the Enron Corporation were being careful too, investing in their 401K's. And then, out of the blue, this huge, stable, powerful company self-destructs and goes bankrupt. And if you're an employee, all your life savings is gone. No matter how careful you are, the future is uncertain. Think about your health. You can lead the healthiest lifestyle in the world – exercise, watch your diet. And that's good! But how many times do you hear about people who suddenly become ill, maybe even drop over dead, for no apparent reason.

The point I'm trying to make is, it is impossible to predict the future – what will happen to your health, what will happen to your portfolio. But as a Christian, you can be certain about one thing - what will happen to your soul. Verse 8 tells us: "You will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." When you die, or when Jesus returns, and you stand before God, God will look into your heart, and he will see that all of your sins have been washed away by the Lamb of God. He will see that you believe in Jesus as your Savior. He will call you blameless, and welcome you into heaven. That's why being a Christian is the best kind of life there is. There's certainty there about the future.

I pray that these words we have focused on today are helpful to you. We live in a world quite similar to first century Corinth. So many things today challenge our faith, cause us to question who we are and why we believe the way we do. But today, through his Word, Jesus reminds us that following him, being a Christian, is the best kind of life there is. Amen.