Hi,

It is Memorial Day -- take a moment to remember and to honor our country’s fallen. We are the beneficiaries of the sacrifices of so very many.

* As I said on Friday, **Patti and I have decided to go ahead and have our 3pm Monday class on Matthew**. I know that some of you will have plans, but the class will be posted on [my YouTube page](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChtwqaUcpZbwyTWnkp6INwQ?view_as=subscriber) soon after class is over. My Tuesday class on Genesis will be at noon on my Facebook page.
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org/). All the postings are up-to-date.

One of the most fascinating books of the New Testament is Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian Christians. They have so many disagreements and problems and all of them are laid in front of Paul; the letter is his response. Here is the opening of Paul’s letter.

**1 Corinthians 1:1-9 (NRSV)**

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

**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:**

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

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

The first paragraphs of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Corinth do not prepare us for what follows. When I taught a class on 1 Corinthians for the first time, I subtitled it, “You Think You’ve Got Problems!” That is pretty much how the letter unfolds. Paul tackles problem after problem among these new house churches. Sometimes he is angry. At other times he seems simply disappointed or even puzzled.

Regrettably, reading the letter is a bit like listening in on one end of a telephone call and trying to make sense of the entire conversation. Because we don’t have any of the reports or letters that Paul has received, we can’t always be sure of the problems to which Paul is responding as their pastor in absentia. Still, it is quite a laundry list: sex, legal disputes, marriage, eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols, chaos in worship, denial of the resurrection, and more.

Indeed, the letter is such a hodgepodge that it is easy to see it as little more than some advice given to a bunch of screwed-up Christians. Perhaps we’re even tempted to say a quick thanks that we are not like them. But all this would be a profound mistake. Paul’s opening paragraphs help us to see this. As Ellsworth Kalas puts it, the Corinthian Christians are “flowers in the rubble.”

*The “rubble?”*

I think that if I lived in Corinth in 50AD, I probably wouldn’t like my city being referred to as “rubble.” But I’d have to admit that was some truth in it. Corinth was a tough town. It was a thriving port city founded by the Romans a century after they burned it. Corinth was established as a colony for retired veterans of the Roman legions. Combine those retired soldiers with lots of transient sailors and you get a city that was more resistant to Paul’s good news than most. Corinth teemed with pagan temples and temple prostitutes. Kalas writes, “In the first century a young man who had been to Corinth was described, with a snicker I’m sure, as being ‘corinthianized.’ He had been introduced to easy and flagrant evil. . . . How can a church bloom in such a setting?”

*Only a few flowers*

The fact that Paul could plant any flowers among the Corinthian rubble is a testament to God’s power and grace. And Paul knows it. He is thankful that God has planted these flowers whom he is to lead, even as he prepares to correct and, at times, scold them. He can love them and exercise pastoral leadership at the same time.

The opening verses of Paul’s letter sets the stage for all that follows. Richard Hays writes:

By the end of the first nine verses, Paul has sketched a sweeping picture of the Corinthian church’s calling: They have been called by God to participate in a movement, along with others all around the known world, to extend the destiny of Israel by living as a covenant people set apart for the service of God. God has lavished upon them spiritual gifts that enable their mission of bearing witness to the grace of Jesus Christ, and God supports and strengthens the community during the present age, while they await God’s final judgment of the world. During the time of waiting, God prepares and sanctifies the community and brings them together into close fellowship with Christ and with one another. In short, Paul portrays the Corinthians as important players in a grand story scripted by God.

*Against all odds*

It is easy to shortchange God, to have low expectations of a too-small-god. I bet that most people looking in on these new Christians in Corinth would have walked away betting that it would be just another fly-by-night movement. Indeed, Paul tells the Corinthians to tone down the chaos in their worship so that outsiders wouldn’t draw the wrong conclusion (14:23).

Yet, against all odds, here we are two millennia later reading a letter written to these “flowers in the rubble,” hearing of their problems and sharing in their hopes. Even learning a few names along the way. The truth is that there are no “odds” so far as the purposes of God are concerned, only the certainty of God’s victory, God’s love, and the everlasting lordship of our savior Jesus Christ.

*A bit more: some helpful vocabulary from the letter*

There are three words in verse 2 that Paul uses to describe the immature and struggling Christians in Corinth. After reading the letter, it is a little surprising that he would use such words, but it illustrates Paul’s deep understanding of the power and grace of God.

*“church”* – refers to the entire group of Christians in Corinth, not to any building or place. The early Christians in Corinth and elsewhere didn’t meet in any single building but in people’s homes. The only common denominator among these people was that they all called “on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 2). It was their faith in Jesus Christ that bound them to one another and to all other followers of Jesus and still binds them to us today. It is faith in Christ and faith alone that marks out the people of God

*“sanctified”* – Webster helps here: to sanctify is to set apart for a sacred purpose. John Wesley described sanctification as setting apart a person (or anything) for its intended purpose. What is our purpose? Why has God created us? In the words of the great Westminster Confession, the purpose of humankind is to know God and enjoy him forever. By his grace, God has *both* sanctified each of us (set us apart for his purposes) *and* is in the process of sanctifying us. Our possession of sanctification is God’s gift. The process of sanctification is a cooperative effort between God and ourselves. This is another of the “both/ands” of the Christian faith.

*“saints”* – It is unfortunate that this word has come to mean a “super-Christian” or something similar. In the New Testament, “saint” is synonymous with “believer.” Saints are those who have been set apart, sanctified, by God. All those who have faith in Jesus Christ are saints, living and dead. As Paul would later write “to the saints in Ephesus . . . There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 1:1, 4:4-6)

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott