



Sermon Transcript September 19, 2021

An Appeal for U.N.I.T.Y. “U” - Unceasing Gratitude 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 19, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, **5** that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— **6** even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— **7** so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, **8** who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. **9** God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Introduction

What do you see when you look around and see the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church? What do you see? Go ahead, look around you.

If you look around right now, you see people you know and people you don't know. You see people who are different than you. You see a diverse group of ages. You see people from different backgrounds, different stories. You see varied levels of education, varied levels of socio-economic status and varied stages of life. We have singled, married, widowed, divorced, with children, without children, full nest and empty nest. In other words, when you look around at the people who comprise Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church, it is a diverse group of people. In fact, it is a diverse group of people who probably wouldn't gather together for any other reason than the fact that Jesus is both your Lord and mine.

If you have been part of this church family for a period of time, when you look around at this diverse group of people, you also see history. You have history with these people. Much of that history is good. It is part of why this church family is still "your people." But as in any church, our history together can have its difficulties. Perhaps there is a personality you have had "history" with and you find that person to be a challenge. Perhaps part of your history with this church family includes hurt, or disappointment or feeling forgotten. Perhaps there is a wound that continues to simmer under the surface or an unresolved conflict that remains unresolved and it clouds what you see when you look around at the people who comprise Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church. You are still here. You are still part of this church family. But that wound is part of what you see when you look around and see this church family known as Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church.

What do you see when you look around and see the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church?

What do you think God sees when he looks around and sees the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church? And furthermore, is what you see when you look around at the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church what God sees?

We are making our way through the first four chapters of 1Corinthians. The main issue Paul is addressing here is the unity of the church. He says in 1 Corinthians 1:10, *"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that you be united."*

We saw last week that Paul makes this appeal for unity because the church is divided. He says to them in verse 11, *“For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.”* Paul says, “You are not on the same page.” This is disconcerting to Paul because their division has a negative impact on their witness to their city. The presenting issue here is their division. But the pressing issue on Paul’s heart and Paul’s mind is that their division hinders their witness to the community. At the end of 1 Corinthians 1:17 he articulates his real and sobering concern; the concern that the cross of Christ might be emptied of its power. That is a sobering thought. And so for the sake of the gospel, he makes his appeal for unity.

Do you think our region needs Jesus? We live in the seventh most post-Christian region (Hartford-New Haven) of the country. In fact, eight of the top ten most post-Christian regions of the country are in the northeast. We live in a region that needs to see Jesus. How will they see Jesus in us? It is not going to be through our arguments. They are not going to see Jesus through our protests. They are not going to see Jesus through Facebook posts. Jesus said in John 13:35 that people will know that we are disciples of Jesus—followers of Jesus—people who belong to Jesus *“if you love one another.”* If you are really serious about wanting to impact this region for Christ, then it starts with your love for your brothers and sisters you see when you look around and see the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church.

And yet, loving one another is not always easy. When we look around and see each other—Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church—we see people who are different than us. We see history we have had with each other, some good and some difficult. My contention is that unless we see what God sees when he looks at us, we will not love one another the way we are called to and we will empty the cross of its power and our light in this broken and dark region of the country will be very dim.

In 1 Corinthians 1-4, Paul shares five methods to help us maintain our unity. We are going to take the acronym U.N.I.T.Y. and look at these five methods as we seek to respond to Paul’s appeal for unity. This morning we look at “U” - Unceasing Gratitude. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:4, *“I give thanks to my God always.”* Paul’s heart is filled with unceasing gratitude for this rather difficult church in Corinth. Ken Boa notes that “gratitude is closely related to love.”¹ I definitely see the connection between gratitude and love in this passage. In fact, my premise—my main idea is—if **we see what God sees when he looks at Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church, we will be filled with unceasing gratitude to God for this church family.** What does God see when he looks at us? Do you see what God sees?

Do You See A People Belonging to God?

Notice what Paul first says he is grateful for in verse 4. *“I give thanks to my God always—unceasing gratitude— for you.”* For who? He is talking about this difficult and challenging church in Corinth. Paul has unceasing gratitude for this church. Why? Simply put, Paul understands that these people belong to God. In other words, he sees what God sees when he looks at these people. Paul sees people who belong to God.

Paul begins this letter with a greeting. He introduces himself in the letter by saying, *“Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle.”* Paul is very much aware of the fact that he is what he is by the grace of God. Many of you know the story. He was on his way to persecute the church in Damascus, and while on the road to Damascus, Jesus appears to Paul (then called Saul) in a bright light and by his grace, Jesus calls Paul to himself—to be an apostle who will bring Jesus to the Gentiles. This act of God’s grace so impacted Paul that he said to this church in Corinth—1 Corinthians 15—that he was *the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.* And then he said rather humbly, with great gratitude, *“But by the grace of God, I am what I am.”* Paul was keenly aware that it was God’s grace alone that called him and made him part of the people of God.

In his greeting, Paul uses the same word—*called*—to describe the Corinthian church. Just like Paul was called by God’s grace on the road to Damascus, he says of the church in Corinth in verse 2 that they too were *called* by God’s grace. They too were *called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.* In Acts 18, we have the story of Paul coming into Corinth for the first time and he had a very fruitful ministry there. In fact, he was told in a vision to stay there for awhile (he was there for a year and a half). I love the reason why the Lord told him to stay there. He said to Paul, *“I have many in this city who are my people.”* There were many in Corinth whom God was going to call to himself. Many of those people were the people he was writing to in this letter. In writing to the church in Corinth, Paul is very much aware that he is writing to people who belong to God. That is what he sees when he sees this church. He sees what God sees. He sees people who are precious to God. He sees people, who in verse 9 are described as people who *were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.* He sees people who belong to Jesus.

Is that what you see when you look around and see the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church? Do you see people who have been called by God’s grace? Do you see people who *call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*? Do you see people,

who like you, call Jesus their Lord and have entered into fellowship with Jesus? John tells us in 1 John 1 that the fellowship we have with each other is first rooted in the fellowship we have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We all have different stories, precious stories, of how God in his grace has called us to be his people. Don't lose sight of what God sees when he looks at his people.

The question isn't just "what do you see when you see God's people at Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church?" But, to take it a little further, perhaps a more penetrating question would be, "Do you look at God's people here at Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church with the same look that Jesus gives us?" What is that look? Thomas Goodwin was a Puritan who wrote a book called *The Heart of Christ*. Actually, that was the abbreviated title. Listen to the second half of the title of this book. "A Treatise Demonstrating: The gracious disposition and tender affection of Christ in his human nature now in glory, unto his members under all sorts of infirmities, either of sin or misery."² Not only is that a mouthful, it is powerful. The eyes of Jesus looks upon his people—in the midst of their infirmities, sin, misery—and his look comes with a "gracious disposition and tender affection." That sets the tone for how we are to look at God's people—"gracious disposition and tender affection." That kind of a look is born out of unceasing gratitude for a people called by God's grace. It is a look that forms and shapes our unity. Do you see a people belonging to God?

Do You See a People Gifted by God?

When Paul looks at this church in Corinth, he doesn't just see a people who belong to God, but he also sees a people who have been gifted by God. Notice in verse 4 how Paul moves into a very specific reason he is grateful for this church in Corinth. He says, "*I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.*" Now at first glance, when Paul says that he *gives thanks . . . because of the grace of God* "you might be tempted to think that Paul is referring to their salvation. *"For by grace you have been saved by faith."* But that is not "the grace" that Paul is referring to here. He defines "the grace" he is talking about in verse 7. Here he says that as a church *"you are not lacking in any gift."* In this context, the word "grace" refers to spiritual gifts. Peter uses the word "grace" this way in 1 Peter 4:10. *"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."* The spiritual gifts God gives us varies from person to person in the church. But no matter what that gift happens to be, it is given to us by *the grace of God*. Paul has unceasing gratitude for the spiritual gifts given to the church at Corinth. These spiritual gifts are given to serve and build up the body of Christ.

I find this to be fascinating. If you know anything about 1 Corinthians, you know that Paul spends a good amount of time talking about spiritual gifts. He begins chapters 12-14 by telling them that he doesn't want them to be uninformed about spiritual gifts. These spiritual gifts are important to the unity of the body. And so, Paul affirms that we all have spiritual gifts. These gifts differ from person to person. When we use these spiritual gifts we are serving each other.

But we also know that one of the reasons Paul addresses the issue of spiritual gifts is because of the abuse that was taking place around some of these gifts, namely speaking in tongues, prophecy and words of knowledge. The way they were exercising these gifts was having a negative impact when they met for worship. As a result, they weren't building up the body the way these gifts were intended to. They seemed to be more enamored with the gift than they were the Giver of the gift. Instead of unifying the body, the way they were exercising their gifts was dividing the body. But that being said, when Paul gives thanks for the *grace of God* and for the fact that *they are not lacking in any gift* it is these very gifts he gives thanks for. He says in verse 5 that they were "*enriched in all speech and in all knowledge.*" In doing so, he is acknowledging the legitimacy of these gifts and they are a sign that confirms that Christ is among them. That is what he says in verse 6. The presence of spiritual gifts is a sign that confirms Christ is present.

Serving one another, exercising the spiritual gifts God has given us, is what we do as we wait for the return of Christ. In verse 7 Paul said that they were not lacking in any spiritual gift—they had what they needed to serve one another. And then he added, "*as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" We don't wait for Jesus by sitting around and twiddling our thumbs. We don't wait for Jesus by going it alone in our faith apart from the church. Jesus gave three parables in the Olivet Discourse that define for us what we do as "we wait" for the return of Christ. The Parable of the Ten Virgins tells us that we want to be found ready and waiting when Jesus returns. The Parable of the Talents tells us how to be found ready. Jesus has given us talents—varied talents . . . some 5, some 2, some 1—but no matter what we are given we are to invest our gifts into serving Jesus. Where are we to do that? The parable of the sheep and goats tells us that *as often as we do it to the least of these* we do it to Jesus. In Matthew, *the least of these* refers to God's people . . . his disciples . . . his church.

And so when Paul looks around and sees the church, he sees what God sees. He sees people who have been given spiritual gifts—they were not lacking in any gift—they were gifted by God and they served one another. Paul gives thanks to God for the way

they serve one another.

Is that what you see when you see the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church? Do you see people using their gifts to serve the body? I do! I see people leading us in worship, using administrative gifts to organize ministry, stepping in to invest in children and our middle school and high school students. I see people with the gift of service, greeting you and welcoming you as you come on Sunday. I see people encouraging others with a call, a card, a visit. I see people teaching and discipling others . . . men, women. I see prayers . . . graying. Givers are giving. When you take time to see it, you can't help but give thanks for the mutual service we share and in doing so we confirm that Jesus is here. So, Paul expresses unceasing gratitude for people gifted by God.

Do You See a People Sustained by God

Finally, there is one more thing that Paul sees when he sees the church in Corinth. He sees a people sustained by God. God will not let them go. I find verses 8-9 to be powerful and comforting. He says that Jesus *will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.* When we stand before God and Jesus is at our side—our Advocate—we will be presented to the Father as those without guilt. Our guilt has been placed on Jesus and his righteousness has been placed on us. That is why Paul says in verse 2 that we are *sanctified in Christ* (made holy) *saints together*. When Paul sees this church at Corinth, he sees a people that God will not let go.

Now clearly, this church had their fair share of problems. We have two letters Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: 1 and 2 Corinthians. But really, these two letters were part of four letters that he wrote, the other two have long been lost to us. One of those lost letters Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 2:4 as being written with *anguish of heart and with many tears*. There were those in this church who opposed Paul. They questioned his authority as an apostle and they called into question his integrity. Even though he was their “father in the faith” (1 Corinthians 4:15) he found himself having to defend his calling to them. I am sure that was hurtful and painful to Paul. Gordon Fee said that Paul’s ability to give thanks for these people, after all that he went through with them “says much about his own character.”³ I think his character was formed by being able to see what God saw in his people. Paul could not let go of what God could not let go of. What is that? His people!

This really gets to the heart of God’s love for us. We know God loves us. We believe

God loves us. But how do you picture that love? Dane Ortland says that many of us believe God's love for us is infected with disappointment in us. He captures what many of us feel. "He loves us; but it is a flustered love. We see him looking down on us with paternal affection but slightly raised eyebrows: 'How are they still falling short so much after all I have done for them?' we picture God wondering."⁴ But here, at the end of our passage, Paul gives testimony that God's love for us is faithful. His love will be faithful to the end! There is no raising of the eyebrow of disappointment towards the one in Christ. We will be presented to God in Christ as one without guilt. Hallelujah!

I like the way Ortland concludes this thought. He says, "His heart was gentle and lowly towards us when we were lost. Will his heart be any different towards us now that we are found? He loved us in our mess then. He'll love us in our mess now."⁵ Because that is how God sees us, that is what Paul sees when he sees this church. He sees a people sustained by God's love. With unceasing gratitude for God's sustaining love, Paul is able to love this church, even though there is strife and difficulty. He sees what God sees.

Conclusion

Don't lose sight of the fact that Paul's unceasing gratitude for the church at Corinth was expressed during a time of difficult and conflict in the church. Division . . . Sexual immorality . . . Not getting along with those they disagreed . . . Differing opinions about worship . . . Doctrine—this was the context of Paul unceasing gratitude for the church. He was able to express his gratitude for the church because he saw what God saw. God called them. God gifted them. God sustains them.

Do you see what God sees here when he looks at the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church? Do you see a people, who through faith in Jesus, belong to God? Do you see a people gifted by God and serving each other out of the gifts God has richly given us? We mutually benefit from these gifts. Let's serve one another as we wait for Jesus to take us home. Do you see a people sustained by God's love? Sustained to the end! There is no raised eyebrow in God's look towards us. Instead, he holds us tight and will not let us go. And so we hold each other tight and we too will love each other to the end.

"U" - Unceasing Gratitude . . . Leads to unity in the body. Practice that this week. When you pray for the people of WEFC, thank God that he has called us to himself and that we belong to him. Thank God for the people who have touched your life through their ministry to you—thank them! Thank God that he does not let us go! Allow God's sustaining love to be the very thing that causes you to love your brother and your sister.

¹Kenneth Boa *Conformed to His Image* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 137

²Dane Ortland *Gentle and Lowly* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020) 44

³Gordon Fee *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014) 35

⁴Ortland, 189-190

⁵*Ibid.*, 194

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Sermon Date: September 19, 2021

COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What commitments do you want to make to each other as you get started this fall?
2. When you look at Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church, what do you see? Why?



Diving Into The Word

Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

- Paul says that he gives thanks to God always . . . Unceasing Gratitude! Why is an “attitude of gratitude” important to experiencing unity in the church?
- Consider the three things Paul is grateful for:
 - The people of the church - “Belong to God” (v. 4)
 - The spiritual gifts of the church - “Gifted by God” (v. 4-7)
 - The faithful love of God - “Sustained by God” (v. 8-9)

How do these three things help you see WEFC the way God sees WEFC?

What causes you to lose sight of these three things?

Which of these three things resonates with you the most? Why?

How does this impact how you see each other as a group?



Taking It Home

7. What can you do this week to cultivate the practice of “Unceasing Gratitude?”