

Grace

1 Corinthians 15:9-11

Dr. Paul Cannings

A. Reflects (v. 9):

1. For I am the least of the apostles – Paul was not physically in Christ’s presence while Christ walked on earth with His disciples. For this reason, Paul views himself as needing to receive less (like very little) recognition among the brethren than the other disciples may have experienced.

a) On the cross, Jesus was exposed to the eyes of unbelievers; but after the Resurrection, He was seen by believers who could be witnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32). Peter saw Him and so did the disciples collectively. James was a half brother of the Lord who became a believer after the Lord appeared to him (John 7:5; Acts 1:14). The 500 *plus* brethren all saw Him at the same time (1 Cor. 15:6), so it could not have been a hallucination or a deception. This event may have been just before His ascension (Matt. 28:16ff). ^[1]

b) Paul viewed himself as one untimely born, prematurely converted in relationship to unbelieving Israel (1 Cor. 15:8; cf. Rom. 11:26). In 1 Corinthians 15:9–10 Paul corrected a possible attack on his past by providing the balancing view of God’s grace. ^[2]

2. For I am the least of the apostles – Even though the word apostle represents a person who is an ambassador for Christ because of the authority provided to each of them, the qualifying process is of great significance (Paul had no problems with the title):

a) The disciples make a point to establish their authority as apostles in Acts 1:20-26; 1 John 4:1-3 by making sure it is factually, by way of witnesses, substantiated that they were in the very presence of Christ and He chose to use them to serve Him. This is why Paul considers himself the one unusually born (1 Corinthians 15:8).

b) The authority was not just in establishing the New Testament church (Acts 5:1-11; 15; Ephesians 2:20; 4:11), but also in writing the scriptures (John 17:13-17).

3. Not fit—In preaching to a church that challenged Paul's authority and integrity, Paul states that because his call to apostleship was unlike the other disciples' and because he persecuted the church, he does not feel adequate to be considered the same way as the other disciples who physically walked with Christ while He was on earth.

a) He felt less deserving of the office because he had been an opponent of the church (cf. Acts 22:4; 1 Tim. 1:15–16) which he now served (2 Cor. 4:5).^[3]

4. To be called an apostle – Paul's past constantly plagued him, especially when those in the church community had to respect his authority after this very person persecuted them horribly.

a) Paul's description of himself in this passage:

- Untimely born (15:8).
- The least of the apostles (15:9), but not inferior (2 Cor. 11:5).
- Not fit to be called an apostle (15:9).
- A persecutor of the church (15:9).
- One who labored more than all the other apostles (15:10).

5. To be called an apostle – Because Paul persecuted the church, for him to say now he has a divine call and then to request for church members to refer to him in this manner was a struggle.

a) Elsewhere Paul speaks at length on his calling to apostleship and gifting as a special manifestation of God's grace in his life (cf. Gal. 1:15–16; 2:7–9; Eph. 3:2, 7–9; Rom. 1:5; 12:3, 6; 15:15–19; 1 Cor. 3:10). ^[4]

6. I persecuted the church of God - Paul intensely, in a hostile, oppressive manner, harassed the New Testament believers who faithfully gathered to worship the Lord God. Paul makes a point to say 'the church of God', meaning that he willfully and purposefully sought to oppose the sovereign power of God.

a) For Paul's work as a persecutor see Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1, 2; 22:4, 5; 26:9 ff.; Gal. 1:13; for the *church of God* see 1:2; also 12:28. ^[5]

b) This was the one sin for which, though he knew that God had forgiven him (1 Tim. 1:13), yet he could never quite forgive himself (Gal. 1:13). In my 'Life of St. Paul' I have shown from the language used, that this persecution was probably more deadly than has been usually supposed, involving not only torture, but actual bloodshed (Acts 8:4; 9:1), besides the martyrdom of St. Stephen. We can imagine how such deeds and such scenes would, even after forgiveness, lie like sparks of fire in a sensitive conscience. ^[6]

7. I persecuted the church of God - People will oppose God's power and authority, but God, especially in the midst of these circumstances, allows this to expose our faith (Revelation 2:8-11; 3:7-13) and eventually convert or remove our enemies or enemies of the church. This works for our blessing (1 Peter 3:8-17).

8. For I am the least of the apostles - When the Lord saves us, He transforms us into a brand new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), deposits a spiritual gift (1 Peter 4:10), and all of the Holy Spirit into us (Titus 3:4-6) providing to us all spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3-4). We now have the inner ability to walk in His might (Ephesians 3:16; 6:10), enabling us to "do all things through Christ" (Philippians 4:13). However, we have a choice as to whether we "work out our salvation" (Philippians 2:13), as we battle the sinful nature of the flesh (Romans 6:12-14; 7:14-25; Galatians 5:16-19) or walk in the Spirit (Ephesians 5:15-18). If we choose the Spirit, we must renew the mind (Romans 12:2), control our tongue (James 1:26; 3:2-12), manage the eye (Matthew 6:22-23), and focus on "whatever we do in word or deed bring glory to God" (Colossians 3:17). Even though our past life may have been filled with horrible sinful acts the transforming powerful work of the Holy Spirit makes new again.

"The Pharisees and their scribes began grumbling at His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?" 31 And Jesus answered and said to them, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. 32 "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:29-32; NASU)

B. Heals (v. 10):

1. But by the grace of God – The same God that Paul aggressively opposed (we do not struggle with flesh and blood; Ephesians 6:12) extended to him a bountiful, free-hearted, generous favor as the supreme King of all Kings. Even after being saved, the Lord gave Paul a thorn in the flesh that made him weak. Amid all this, Paul was extended the Lord's spontaneous, generous love.

a) Though "not meet to be called an apostle," God's grace has given him the meetness needed for the office (Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:15). Translate, 'His grace which was (showed) *towards* [εἰς] me.' what I am—occupying the honourable office of an apostle. Contrast the self-sufficient prayer of another Pharisee (Luke 18:11). but I laboured—by God's grace (Phil. 2:16). ^[7]

2. I am what I am — Paul, as a believer, struggled with the flesh (Romans 7:14-25), even having a thorn in the flesh making him weak; his history dominated how people viewed him, even the disciples, to the point in the passage he would say "he is the least of the apostles." Paul accepts that he is weak (2 Corinthians 12:7-12), and no matter what he achieved in this life, when it interferes with his walk with Christ, he counts it as lost (Philippians 3:1-7). Paul now accepts who he is because it only energizes him to be faithful to his call.

a) Paul recognized that there is no way to change who he now is. His past actions cannot be changed (his record is forever sealed). His role among the apostles is going

to be the way it is. His development as an apostle is going to be what it is and what God has called him to be. He is going to fervently work at it more than any of the other disciples.

3. His grace towards me did not prove vain - God's bountiful free-hearted generosity that was purposefully extended towards Paul, when created because of nothing Paul did, turned out not to be useless, absent of good works.

4. His grace towards me did not prove vain - God's generous favor towards Paul, especially with all that he did against the very person who freely chose to extend kindness towards him, blessed the same community he persecuted because Paul worked intensely hard to serve God to the point of being poured out like a drink offering (2 Timothy 6:6-8).

5. I labored even more – Paul decided once and for all to work to the point of exhaustion, no matter how difficult the circumstances he encountered (2 Corinthians 11:21-29; 1 Timothy 6:12).

a) He had worked harder than any of the other apostles, as he traveled more, suffered more opposition, wrote more New Testament epistles, and founded more churches. Yet Paul knew and ministered with the recognition that it was not his power but God's (2:4–5) which produced results (3:6). [\[8\]](#)

b) "Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men."
(Acts 20:24-27; NASU)

6. Yet not I but the grace of God – Paul was able to labor to the point of exhaustion, even committed to die for the cause of Christ (Philippians 1:21) because of God's powerful gift of the Holy Spirit that mightily worked within Paul (Colossians 1:9-10).

7. Yet not I but the grace of God – Even though the circumstances of Paul’s past plague him, God’s matchless grace stimulated Paul to passionately serve the Lord so that he abounded beyond all the other disciples.

8. Yet not I but the grace of God – God’s matchless grace should inspire us to love and serve Him, not make us apathetic so that we sin more (Romans 6:1-2) or live a carnal Christian life (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

C. Inspires (v. 11):

1. So we preached – Because of the powerful work of the Holy Spirit, which mightily worked within Paul, he was able to habitually proclaim to everyone the word of God with a very loud voice. He discharged the office of a herald continuously for the glory of God.

a) There are in the New Testament two words for “preaching.” One is often rendered “prophesy,” and refers to spiritual instruction and exhortation. The other, which is used here, is “we proclaim,” or “herald” (*kerussō*), and refers to the statement of the facts of the gospel—Christ crucified and risen (ch. 2:2; Acts 4:2; 8:5). Besides these, there is the one word for “to preach the gospel,” or “evangelize.”^[9]

2. So we preached – What the Lord did for us should make us more passionate about serving Christ.

3. So you believe – Because the Holy Spirit is the One who is mightily working within Paul, those who heard the message were able to develop an unreserved commitment to God together with a deep conviction and confidence that His words are truth.

a) *“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; 7 which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!” (Gal 1:6-9; NASU)*

4. So you believe – How does what God did for us powerfully affect others so that their faith in Christ grows to such a deep conviction their lives are transformed, thus inspiring others to do the same?

[1] Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [The Bible exposition commentary](#) (Vol. 1, p. 617). Victor Books.

[2] Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). [Tyndale concise Bible commentary](#) (p. 558). Tyndale House Publishers.

[3] Lowery, D. K. (1985). [1 Corinthians](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 542). Victor Books.

[4] Ciampa, R. E., & Rosner, B. S. (2010). [The First Letter to the Corinthians](#) (pp. 751–752). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

[5] Barrett, C. K. (1968). [The First Epistle to the Corinthians](#) (p. 345). Continuum.

[6] Spence-Jones, H. D. M., ed. (1909). [1 Corinthians](#) (p. 485). Funk & Wagnalls Company.

[7] Brown, D., Fausset, A. R., & Jamieson, R. (n.d.). [A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Acts–Revelation: Vol. VI](#) (p. 327). William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited.

[8] Lowery, D. K. (1985). [1 Corinthians](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 542–543). Victor Books.

[9] Spence-Jones, H. D. M., ed. (1909). [1 Corinthians](#) (p. 485). Funk & Wagnalls Company.