

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul will address the topic of the future, physical resurrection of believers, which some in Corinth had begun to question. To begin he declares again the essential truths of the gospel message, that Jesus died for our sins, according to the Scriptures and was raised again the third day according to the Scriptures. Having cited select appearances as proof of the resurrection, Paul concludes with himself as the last of the witnesses.

Parenthetically, in a brief biographical statement, Paul gives a small glimpse into how he perceives himself. For Paul it appears to be an irresistible opportunity to give tribute to the grace of God. In this small section Paul offers us a Biblical model on how we should perceive ourselves. Paul views his life, and particularly his apostleship, from three perspectives.

I. *An unworthy candidate needing God's grace* (vv. 8b-9)

1. Three phrases highlight this perception of unworthiness: "one abnormally born" (v 8b), "least of the apostles" and "[does] not deserve to be called an apostle". By these Paul does not diminish his authority as an apostle nor the quality of his message (cf. 2 Cor. 11-12; Galatians 1-2), but rather his personal worthiness to have been considered by God as one to be called an apostle.
2. Paul characterized himself as one who had persecuted the church of God. This contrasts starkly to the other apostles who had followed Jesus as His disciples prior to being called as His apostles. Paul was a persecutor of the church right up to the time of his conversion and calling to be an apostle. As a persecutor of the church, he was also a persecutor of God. (This best explains the term "one abnormally born." By implying a birth that was not merely premature but also violent, Paul alludes to the miraculous intrusion by God which resulted in his conversion and included his calling to be an apostle.) Paul did not value any of those aspects of his life, which some might have seen as positive qualification. (Cf. Philippians 3:4-8.) He needed God's grace.

This is exactly what every person needs, as did the other apostles. It could even be said, that it is good to remember our sinful backgrounds and judge our former sinfulness properly as rebellion against God. Our sin was the reason Jesus had to die. The more we realize our sinfulness, the greater will be our appreciation for God's forgiving grace.

II. *An diligent worker energized by God's grace* (v. 10)

Paul was indeed an apostle and he considered himself a diligent worker, one who worker harder than all the others. But his labor was energized by the grace of God, without which it would have been nothing.

1. The term translated "worked" means to labor to the point of weariness. Unlike the other apostles he had worked to support himself and he ministered as well, even night and day (cf. Acts 20:31). Paul had excelled above the others and was not hesitant to say so.
2. But at the same time Paul attributed it all to God's grace. Paul was saved by grace, called by grace and he labored by grace. All that he did and accomplished was the result of God's grace.

This, again, is exactly the perspective which we need. First, it is correct to acknowledge what we have done, but, second, we must also realize that it is by God's grace that we have accomplished it. Humility does not deny what we can or have done, but acknowledges God's grace as the true source of that strength, ability and effectiveness. False humility is often not genuine or encourages wrong thinking. Even worse it robs us of the opportunity to give tribute to God's grace.

III. *A resurrection witness preaching God's grace* (v. 11)

As a resurrection witness preaching God's grace Paul was no different than any of the other apostles.

1. The apostolic task was to witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The death of Jesus for our sins and His resurrection was the unified message of all the apostles.
2. This message, too, was what the Corinthians had believed and was the foundation of their new lives in Christ. (Cf. Romans 10:9.)

This gospel message is a message of grace. It is by grace that Jesus died for us. It is by grace that His sacrifice was received as sufficient for us. Paul's focus was not on himself but on God and His grace. His task in life was to proclaim God's grace for the salvation of people and for the ultimate glory of God.

People seem at times preoccupied with problems involving how they perceive themselves. The real problem is something bigger. Instead of looking at themselves, they should be looking at God and His grace.

Paul would probably fail some of the present-day psychoanalyses with too low self-esteem (having referred to himself as a miscarriage) or with a superiority complex (claiming to work harder than anyone else). But Paul evaluated himself realistically and focused than on God and His grace.

Grace is unmerited favor. God does us a totally undeserved favor when He saves us, gives us a ministry and produces fruit in it. Except by God's grace I would not even have wanted to know about God. Nothing good lives in my sinful nature (Romans 7:18). Apart from God's grace, there is nothing to esteem in me.

But praise be to God's grace. All who believe are in Christ and are new creations. But it is not because of us. It is by God's grace. We can do all things in Christ who strengthens us.

And this is the message which we get to share. It's the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a message of God's grace.