

Prayers

Opening prayer

All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ; You have given us hope when we could find no other, You have saved us when we had wandered far away, You have blessed us when we were undeserving, and You have loved us when we had done nothing to deserve Your attention. We praise You because You are our Lord and God; may we not be ashamed to declare this to the world. Alleluia!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Lift your hands to the Lord in prayer. There is evidence in Scripture that this was one of the ways ancient Jewish people prayed to God; see if it helps you focus your thoughts and words on your Saviour.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about 'holidays'**. *Pray for those who are not able to take time out from their work or their home obligations for what we might call a 'holiday'. Remember that a holiday is about 'rest', and God has always been concerned that all His creatures have rest (see Genesis 2:1-3)*
- *Pray for your local police and the work they do (or do not do) in your neighbourhood to reduce crime*
- *Give thanks to God for His power to forgive those who repent, and pray that people will indeed repent of their sins*

Meditation

See the marks of faith in the lives of others;

The saints of God who live by the Spirit.

Peace on the face of one who is suffering

Sustained by God's power, despite all trials.

Truthful speech of integrity and wisdom

Spoken with authority, and straight to the heart.

A life lived in tune with God and with others;

A heart of faithfulness and a rock of faith.

The help of one who takes care to notice,

Giving service where possible, whatever the cost.

Take to yourself the true marks of faith;

Join the saints of God who live by the Spirit.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4

¹⁴ Natural people do not receive the things of God's Spirit, for they are folly to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are decided spiritually. ¹⁵ Now those who are spiritual may decide all things, and yet come under no one else's scrutiny, for,

¹⁶ 'Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?'

But we have the mind of Christ!

^{3:1} Yet, fellow believers, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people, but as worldly people, as babes in Christ. ² I gave you milk, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it, and even now you cannot ³ because you are still worldly. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly and behaving like other people? ⁴ When someone says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not like others?

Review

This is not an easy passage of Scripture to understand, and the secret to it lies in looking at the wider picture of what Paul writes here in his letter. This passage is also one of the rare occasions where if we want to understand the text, we must read the Scriptures across the chapter divisions. Remember, these together with the verses were added many centuries after the time of Christ. The Bible chapters were first worked out by an Archbishop of Canterbury in the 13th century, the Old Testament verses were added by a Jewish priest in the 15th century, and a Christian scholar added the New Testament verses in the 16th century. We owe a great debt to them, but their interpretations were sometimes wrong!

Returning to our passage, we know already that Paul was not happy with the Corinthians. He was writing to try and deal with their problems, the first of which were their divisions (1:10f. and 3:3,4). In this passage however, Paul sought to challenge another problem. The Corinthians believed that because they possessed spiritual gifts they therefore knew 'all things' (2:15), and their understanding of the things of Christ should not be challenged by anyone (2:14-16). Paul was shocked at this attitude, and sought to challenge it (3:1-4).

Now when we read this passage, we may well be challenged ourselves by the rather complex ideas written by Paul at the end of chapter 2 (2:14-16). We may also be fascinated by what he says at the beginning of chapter 3 about the difference between spiritual food that is 'milk', and that which is 'solid food' (3:2). The greatest challenge we face in this passage, however, is to gain a full understanding of why Paul says what he does. To do this we must understand something about the nature of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which is not necessarily obvious at this point certainly become so later on.

Throughout the book of one Corinthians, Paul deals one by one of a series of problems within the church at Corinth; understanding apostleship (chapter 4), dealing with immorality (chapter 5), lawsuits amongst believers (chapter 6), and so on. At the beginning of some of these chapters, but not all, Paul appears to quote what the Corinthians have said about these issues, and then reply to them. A clear example of this is found in chapter 6 verse 12, where Paul quotes a catchphrase of the Corinthians, '*everything is permissible for me*' (see also 4:8,9; 6:1-3; 7:1f and 12:30).

Below, I have written the text of our passage again, with one crucial editorial change. I have placed in bold that section of text that is, I believe, a quote from what the Corinthians have said themselves. I emphasise, the words in bold are not what Paul is saying for himself, they are what he is challenging. In this passage of Scripture, Paul confronts the Corinthian's own assessment of themselves that they are spiritual people who can decide for themselves the things of God. No, Paul is in complete disagreement, he believes that he is the church's apostle who has a right to teach them and lead them from spiritual 'milk', to spiritual 'solid food'. He is the one who has to 'mind of Christ'.

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Now you may find it rather difficult to accept my interpretation. In whatever way you read it, however, you cannot deny that verses 14,15 and 16 describe the attitude of one who believes that by possessing God's Spirit, no further teaching or criticism from anyone else is required. This is even supported by the inappropriate use of a quote from Isaiah 40:13, '*who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?*'

Yet Paul argued his case not against Scripture, but against the Corinthians. Of course, the mind of the Lord is given to some, and he argues that the mind of the Lord has been given to him to teach the Corinthians, and they have not properly developed from the milk of the Gospel to its solid food. It is a hard thing to say,

but Paul was able to speak with clarity and honesty, and in due time, the church has accepted that he was in fact right.

The conclusion we must all draw from reading this passage of Scripture, is that it is unwise for any of us to claim the spirit of God in such an absolute sense that we believe we are beyond correction by someone else. It is a salutary lesson.

Going Deeper

- Notes about the translation of the passage
- More about the 'quote' theory
- The discernment of spiritual things
- Babes in Christ, milk not solid food

Notes about the translation of the passage:

V14 'Natural people ...'

The Greek word here is 'psychikos' which is translated by Bible versions in many different ways. However, this stands in contrast to the spiritual person, and refers to someone who has not received the Spirit and is in their natural, un-spirit-filled state. This word is part of a complex set of words in this text which is explained more fully in the study.

V14 '... does not receive the things of God's Spirit.'

This is a fairly literal translation of the Greek, which I explain in the study, but many Bible versions try to make this more understandable, by giving translations like this; 'do not receive the gifts of the Spirit' (NRSV) or 'the things that come from the Spirit of God' (NIV). In each case, we are tempted to think of the specific 'gifts of the spirit', which are not mentioned here at all. It simply refers to 'spiritual things', and I would offer this as a second option for translating this phrase.

V15f. The 'quote'

Verses 15 and 16 seem to be a quote from what was reported to Paul for several reasons (see study below). However, we must remember that the ancient texts of these letters are written with single capital letters only and with no form of punctuation as we would recognise it. We have to infer the beginnings and endings of sentences by references to small words called 'particles' which normally connect sentences; these are words like 'now', or 'but', or 'yet'. It is my opinion that their use here suggests Paul is not simply conveying his own ideas but a quote.

3V2 'you were not able to receive it.'

The Greek says 'you could not ...', meaning that the Corinthians were not 'able' to receive the solid food Paul wished to give, even if he had offered it. The picture conjures up the picture of a child unable to take food too advanced for its age.

V3 'behaving like other people.'

The Greek says 'behaving like men'. I am not attempting to make any point about the use of what is called 'sexist' language here, but I do feel that the passage is best translated in this way because of the fact that Paul is talking to 'fellow believers'. His contrast is not just 'men' in general, but those who are outside of the fellowship, i.e. 'other people'.

More about the 'quote' theory

We previous studies, we discovered that Paul told the Corinthians not to accept the pagan 'mystery religion' approach to Christian faith (2:6f.). Some of the Corinthians had imported these idea into the Christian faith, and as a consequence, suggested that spiritual people were those who had attained 'wisdom' and found the meaning of the 'mysteries' of God. This is why some people began to believe that they were above reproach from their true spiritual leader, Paul.

Our passage today is also filled with Greek words found in these mystery religions, but most of us will not spot them. These pagan religions generally believed in three categories of people; firstly, earthly people ('hylic') who could not be saved because they had not received any revelation of the mysteries of God. Secondly, there were those who could be saved because they had received the wisdom of God and knew the mysteries, and they were the 'pneumatikos', the 'spiritual'. In between, however, were the 'psychikos', the 'natural' who had some insight to the truth but needed to be drawn higher into spiritual things to reach the status of the spiritual, the 'pneumaticos'. It is easy to see how this hierarchy leads to people believing that

they are beyond correction! Paul challenges this directly in verse 15 and in everything he says about the work of the Spirit.

Also, it appears that the Corinthian Christians claimed '*we have the mind of Christ*', by reference to a famous Old Testament passage from Isaiah (2:15), though you will see that it is quoted somewhat inaccurately. Although it may seem reasonable at first for a Christian to say 'we have the mind of Christ', the more we think about it, the more it seems odd for a follower and disciple of Jesus, for who of us can claim anything other than that Christ has revealed some small part of His plans to us? In order to sort out what Paul thought about this quote, however, we can in fact turn to one other place in scripture where Paul uses this same passage from Isaiah 40, and this is Romans 11:31. Here, Paul quotes Isaiah accurately to suggest that we cannot fully know the mind of Christ which will only be revealed at the Last. The force of all this is to persuade me that I am right to question verses 14 and 15, and suggest that they are reference to what the Corinthians believe rather than what Paul is advocating as a Christian principle..

The discernment of spiritual things

Now that we have established what is going on in this passage, we can say with more clarity than before that Paul regards the 'spiritual person' as someone who has received the Spirit of God (2:11) and is therefore capable of learning the things of God (2:13) and benefitting from those things given to us by the Spirit (2:14). In the first verse of our passage today, Paul speaks about receiving the 'things of God's Spirit' and being able to understand them as being from God. This much is undoubtedly what Paul wished to advocate to the Corinthians, and although we may be tempted to think of the gifts of the Spirit as being what God offers through His Spirit, it clearly means much more.

Throughout Paul's writings, he speaks of different blessings and benefits of the Spirit in different ways. In Romans, the Spirit is mentioned primarily in chapter 8, the highlight of the letter which speaks of connection between living 'in Christ' and living 'in the Spirit' (e.g. see 8:5,9,10). Later on in Corinthians, Paul speaks about the famous 'gifts of the Spirit' which are given variously but within the unity of the 'body of Christ', and the gift of worshipping 'with the Spirit' (14:14f.). In Galatians, Paul speaks about the 'promise of the Spirit' that is received by faith (Gal 3:14) and also the famous 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22f.), and there is a great deal more. The riches of God given to us in the Spirit are as unfathomably vast as the greatness of God's love, according to Paul, but nowhere (apart from here) is there any hint that those who have such great gifts should be anything other than gracious in their receipt and generous in their use.

I find no suggestion elsewhere that those who have the Spirit and have received God's special blessing or word should claim that this exempts them from the normal responsibilities and subjection of human relationships. Only here in scripture is there any phrase that suggests that Christians might be above criticism by others because of the work of the Spirit in them, and this suggests to me that it is wiser to accept that this is not Paul's teaching, but the claim of the Corinthians that Paul is about to refute, extremely bluntly!

Babes in Christ, and 'milk, not solid food'

Immediately after saying these contentious words in verses 15 and 16, Paul speaks with such force it is shattering. Remember, the letter itself contained no chapter division or even any new paragraph start; all the papyri copies of this ancient letter flow on directly from verses 2:16 to 3:1. The result of reading it like this is to realise that Paul was severely chastising the Corinthians for suggesting that they need not be subject to anyone else because they were 'spiritual'. With hardly a pause, Paul described the Corinthians as 'babes in Christ' and worst of all, as 'worldly'! This was not the language of Greek Gnosticism, but Old Testament language for people who were subject to the judgement of God (see Psalm 9:8, 98:89; Isaiah 13:11, Ezekiel 26:20 etc.), and not doing God's will! If there was a connection with the language of gnosticism, it implied that the Corinthians were the earthly 'hylic' who could not be saved; what an insult! Certainly, Paul made it obvious that he was displeased because the talk of division and party spirit was so completely opposed to the will of God, which was unquestionably for His people to be united in Him (see Jesus' last prayer in John 17, etc.). How could the Corinthians claim to be spiritual and 'have the mind of Christ' when they lived in public disarray?

This point is demonstrably clear, but added to it is Paul's comment; 'I gave you milk, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it ...' (3:2). This is the evangelist talking plainly to the converted that they have received the Gospel, but their presumption that they now know everything about God and the life of faith is catastrophically presumptive. Peter preached to converts encouraging them to 'long for the pure spiritual milk, so that you may grow into salvation' (1 Peter 2:2), and the use of this illustration by both Paul and Peter suggests that it was something that was not an insignificant part of the way that the apostles talked about their teaching. They were deeply conscious of their years with Jesus, receiving the 'spiritual milk' of His teaching long before they received the Spirit especially for the task of the establishment of the church. 'Milk' and 'solid food' were also spoken of by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (5:12,13), and he says that whilst milk is necessary, those who live on the milk but not on solid food are 'still an infant, unskilled in the word of righteousness.' There is absolutely no doubt that Paul's concern for the Corinthians, from the point

of view of scripture as a whole, suggests that they had much yet to learn about the nature of their salvation, let alone the things of the Spirit!

Paul's point is completely at odds with the claim of the Corinthians that they knew 'the mind of Christ'. He told them that there was much to learn, and they were not yet ready to learn it. In later chapters of 1 Corinthians, we discover much more about the inadequacies of the Corinthian church. It is extraordinary that Paul should speak so boldly to people who otherwise thought they were doing fine as a church! What little evidence we have suggests that Paul's letter was indeed shattering to the Corinthian church, though some people understood full well what Paul was saying. People were offended, however, and Paul had to write a second letter defending his right to speak to the Corinthians in such a way. But that is another letter of Paul, for another day!

Discipleship

Application

The importance of accepting scrutiny and assessment from others

There are immediate and necessary consequences to what we have studied today. The points I have made are not new, and have been understood throughout the years. However, some Christians believe strongly that this is wrong. They have read the Bible without recourse to careful scrutiny and have read this passage as supporting the idea that once appointed within the church a person (usually a leader) should be able to act without being criticised. They refuse to allow what they to be assessed and quote this text as proof that they are exempt from scrutiny! The results are often tragic; clergy and church leaders who believe that they are above reproach and always right, and preachers who will not grow in their work for the Lord because they refuse to accept the discernment of others.

There are so many scriptural principles that counter such inappropriate single-mindedness, it is hard to know where to start. The Old Testament prophets were charged with the specific task of challenging the leaders of God's people (usually the Kings), such as David who was challenged by Nathan, and Ahaz and Hezekiah who were challenged by Isaiah. It was inbuilt into the leadership of God's people that no man should assume absolute authority over the people of God (1 Samuel 8). In the New Testament, Jesus crushed any attempt by his disciples to assume rights over the others (see Matthew 16 to 20 where He deals with rivalry). The writing of all the great letter writers of the New Testament emphasise the humility of faith, joy, peace, love and hope without exception. There is no question that God's people are accountable to God, and also that whilst they live and work together as part of the Kingdom here on earth, they are accountable to each other, whoever they are and whatever posts they hold. It is tragic that because of a misunderstanding of the nature of one text, some have been led to be too bold with the presumption of their status and power within the church. This is a huge issue for all Christians today.

Growing in Christ

Questions for groups

1. Discuss in your group the main issue here about the interpretation of verses 15 and 16. Do you have problems with the approach of this study? If so, what are they?
2. Look at Isaiah 40:13 and discuss in your group what you think it originally meant.
3. What is the difference between Gospel 'milk' and 'solid food'? Look up Hebrews 5:12 and 1 Peter 2:2 as well.

Discipleship challenges

- *Do your best to ensure that you understand the issues at stake here in the interpretation of this passage of scripture. Ask yourself this; do you believe that you are beyond criticism? Who are you prepared to listen to and respect as a teacher?*
- *Pray for those who struggle to deal with passages of scripture like this, and which do not necessarily mean what they appear to say at first reading. Pray that God's people will be wise in discerning the things of God.*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, we build our hopes on You. Save us from the sands of doubt and liberate us from the quicksands of despair. Lead us through life on the solid rocks and the stones of faith left for us to walk on by saints who have gone before. Thank You Lord. AMEN
