

Prayers

Opening prayer

Show me, Lord Jesus, how to live the simple life of faith. Show me trust, love, grace and kindness, and good quality of life. Then show me how to hold these gifts firmly against the attacks and lies of the enemy, and against the mockery of the world. I am not ashamed of You, Lord Jesus; by Your grace, I will not fall from where I now stand, and I will live to praise Your Name: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Be quiet today and think about all that the Lord has done for you. Let your mind wander and be blessed by recalling past times of happiness, love and faith. Pray to ask the Lord to bless you in the future with such things.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those who work with the text of Scripture.** Pray for scholars, both Christian and Jew, who spend their lives working on the details of the Hebrew language so that we may have good translations of the Bible at our disposal, and be able to interpret what it says with reasonable accuracy.
- Pray for all who are in prison, especially those who know they have done wrong and want to be better people.
- Give thanks to God for His love and compassion, especially at those moments of your life when you feel in need. Remember that God loves you always, event though you may not feel this to be true; you will surely discover this later.

Meditation

I stand beneath the Cross of Christ.

It speaks to me of unspeakable love,
It shouts at me the shame of humanity;

It cries for me the tears of tragedy,
It weeps with me the pain of animosity;

It silences me and drowns my thoughts,
It stops my heart and drains my spirit;

It numbs my senses and my gnawing grief,
It ends the world for me; but not for You:

For here beneath the Cross of Christ,
I find my faith and also my humanity;

The worlds of heaven and earth are one,
And love begins to conquer all my sin

Then, as I stand beneath the Cross of Christ
I find it empty, and my needy soul renewed!

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

¹ This is how people should think of us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God; ² this being so, it is expected of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

³ It is of little consequence to me that I should be called to account by you or any human court; indeed, I do not even question myself, ⁴ for I know of nothing that stands against me. But that does not prove me innocent, it is the Lord who examines me.

⁵ So stop passing any judgement before time, until the Lord has come; for He will bring to light what is hidden within darkness and reveal the inner motives. After that, the approval of each one will be from God.

Review

The first three chapters of 1 Corinthians tell us that Paul wrote because of division and strife within the church at Corinth. The church there had been led astray from the Gospel, so Paul wrote to defend the truth of God's Word as he first preached. Today, we might expect any divisions within the church to be healed through conciliation and compromise, but we must learn from Paul that the supreme truth of the Gospel cannot be the subject of negotiation. Because of this, it is easy to see why Paul's opponents might have regarded him as stubborn and obstinate, and our passage today contains Paul's defence against such accusations.

1 Corinthians 4 begins with a stout defence of Paul's ministry and apostleship. He appeals to the Corinthians to regard each famous apostle or church leader as a '*servant of Christ*' (4:1); in other words, the message is more important than the messenger. The preachers who had brought them the Gospel had not preached in order to gain personal followings, but to build up the church of God; mere human beings had the privilege of delivering the supernatural and heavenly '*mysteries of God*'. Moreover, the preacher should be found '*trustworthy*', meaning that their deeds and words should be consistent with the Gospel. These are the high standard of all who preach the Gospel; how then could any true preacher foster beliefs that feed division within the church?

Paul knew that some within the church at Corinth were questioning whether his message was indeed the pure Gospel. But he was not afraid of any court set up to 'judge' him (4:3), he merely proclaimed his innocence and his confidence in God, '*I do not even question myself, for I know of nothing that stands against me*' (4:3,4). Paul writes to defend himself from accusations in most of his letters, writing in Galatians, for example, to say that Jesus Himself had given him the facts of the Gospel (Galatians 1:12). Indeed, Paul called himself an 'apostle' because Jesus had appeared to him and commissioned him in the same way as the other disciples (Matt 28:19f.).

In all this, Paul may still seem arrogant to some. Surely, a preacher who believes himself to be unquestionably right is in danger of being somewhat conceited, or at least, over confident. However, Paul was concerned not about whether other people thought him right, but about whether his Gospel was indeed the true Gospel of God, and because of this, he placed himself into God's hands for His judgement, saying '*it is the Lord who examines me*' (4:4). It was a bold move, for the Corinthians could not deny that the fruit of his work was the initial foundation of the church at Corinth. Paul was confident that before God he was innocent of any charge.

We, like the Corinthians, want to assess whether the message of a preacher is true to the Gospel or not, and for this reason, some question Paul's confidence to this day. However, we live at a time when the things Paul wrote have become Scripture, and in accepting his letters as Scripture, the church has passed judgement that Paul's convictions about the Gospel were indeed right. So when the apostle John writes this; '*do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God ...*' (1 John 4:1), we should not think of this as an invitation to test what Paul says in his letters. Rather we should use his words, as Scripture, to test our own words and our preaching.

In the days of the early church, Christians were acutely aware of the passing of time and the immediate possibility of Jesus' coming, to bring about the end of the 'age'. Paul therefore expresses his confidence in God by telling the Corinthians that he is content to wait for this (4:5), and place his trust in God who will '*reveal the inner motives*' of everyone (4:5). In our own times, when many feel that the return of Christ is a matter of mere conjecture, people place more trust in the judgement of others rather than the judgment of God. Perhaps this is why our own 'party spirits' today have become so deeply entrenched, and our churches remain divided. Surely if we believed that God was indeed about to come and judge us, then we would more readily accept the truth of the Gospel and surrender more willingly to His justice!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Hardworking and trustworthy stewards (4:1,2)
- Paul's accountability (4:3,4)
- When the Lord comes (4:5)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V1 'Servants of Christ ... and stewards ...'

Paul uses a number of words meaning 'servant'. We have already come across slave ('doulos') and servant ('diakones'), but here he uses yet another Greek word for servant ('hyperetas'), and one for a senior attendant, steward or trusted aide ('oikonomous'). These different words all reflect the various forms of service rendered within Roman society with slave ('doulos') as the lowest, and rising in status through the other words for servant to the highest role, that of a trusted household steward (think of Joseph as the powerful steward of Potiphar's household). In this passage, 'hyperetas' refers to servants who perform hard work, originally used to describe rowers on a ship!

V3 'It is of little consequence'

I have translated this rather colloquially because Paul speaks rather colloquially, saying literally 'to me it is rather very little'. The general picture is quite clear!

V3 'that I should be called to account'

The Greek verb here could mean 'called to account' (as I have translated) or 'judged' or 'evaluated'. I have avoided the term judged because this gives the notion of formal proceedings, which are not in mind here. Nevertheless, the word used is the same found in 2:15,16 where the Corinthians claimed they were subject to no one else's 'scrutiny'. This is on Paul's mind (see study)

V3 'by any human court'

The Greek actually says 'by any human day', however the term 'day' refers to what we might call a 'day of reckoning', such as in the 'day of the Lord'. The whole of Paul's case here is that he will answer on the 'day of the Lord' but not on any 'human day'.

V5 'and reveal the inner motives'

This is a little different from many translations which commonly have 'will disclose the purposes of the heart'. Firstly, this phrase follows on from the previous one about Christ's revelation of what is hidden in darkness, and secondly, the Greek word for heart ('kardion') can refer simply to the inner self. I believe this is an example of such a use of the word. By slimming down the sentence in this way it becomes clear that the 'inner motives' refer to the things brought to light by Christ, and not some different entity (as most other translations suggest).

V5 'and after that ...'

Most translations simply use 'then' for the Greek word 'tote', but this word expresses what come next quite strongly, and the English 'then' is often used quite casually. I have therefore used a stronger phrase and this helps to give the last part of this verse a stronger connection with the main thought of the Lord's coming again.

Hardworking and trustworthy stewards (4:1,2)

The first thing Paul says in this letter is that those who preach the Gospel and do the work of Christ's commission must act as 'servants' and 'stewards' with complete integrity and faithfulness. If you look at the notes on the text and translation, you will find that the two Greek words for 'servant' and 'steward' refer to two categories of service rendered in Paul's day. Firstly, the servants were hard workers, indeed, the word 'hyperetas' used here was first used to describe those who toiled in the rowing decks of galleys; rowing was strenuous and essential work when there was no wind and a ship had to keep moving. Yes, the work of the Gospel was hard work, said Paul, and being trustworthy meant being willing to do that hard work whatever the cost.

Those who stand back when the work gets tough are not very useful in the mission of the Church, and as one who has led many mission activities over the years, I can safely say that the Gospel is rarely preached and God is rarely honoured without sustained hard work. Moreover, people do not normally see this hard work, and will often criticise or suggest that little has been done. Also, the work of the Gospel often goes unrewarded in this world, so unless a person is very committed and has a high level of motivation through personal faith, then they will find themselves exposed on mission and often in some difficulty.

The second characteristic of service mentioned by Paul is that of the 'steward'. A household steward was a high office within the Roman world, because if the master of the house was a centurion, for example, his duties could take him all over the world and it was essential for his trusted servant to keep his home

functioning correctly while he was away. The office of 'steward' was important and required hard work, moreover, it was a duty that required initiative and an understanding of the will of the master. In using this example, Paul showed that he was not averse to saying that in the life of the church, some duties were more important than others, and also that skill was required. Such work could not be separated from the rest of the life of the church, but he placed the Gospel and its proclamation above all else both in practice and in spiritual emphasis. This, incidentally, is why 'apostleship' comes first in Paul's list of 'ministry gifts' in Ephesian 4:11. Paul's logic was that because Christ had come into the world to save and redeem, then the church of His followers should have the same priority.

Paul's accountability (4:3,4)

Next, Paul spoke directly about the accountability of one who preached the Gospel. Paul knew that if human reasoning swayed the preacher or the apostle, then there was only a short pathway to the perils of the Corinthian church, where party divisions had created inactivity and paralysis in the church. This is why he spoke openly to say that the opinions of others about what he did were of little significance to him.

Surely, we might say, this is not a good example to those who need to learn about their frailties in preaching and become better in their delivery, speech and witness, for example? But these important details of learning are not the issue here; Paul was not speaking about technique, mannerisms, cultural relevance or language. He was speaking about the heart of the matter, the task of the Gospel itself. Paul was concerned that God's call to preach the Good News to all people should not become the subject of human accounting, for the command to 'go out' had already been given by God, and backed by the promise of the Holy Spirit! Any further reasoning or evaluation would delay the Gospel.

Indeed, Paul also said 'I do not even question myself.' Again, we might raise our eyebrows at this because it is inbred into us today that we must be self critical and self analytical. I reckon Paul would not have spoken against well meaning self analysis to improve the individual's skills and self esteem, but by saying that he did not question himself, Paul spoke against the spiritual paralysis of the soul, something that prevents much preaching of the Gospel today. To illustrate this, ask people at church about why they do not speak to others very often about the Gospel, and you will find that most are quite scared about what will happen if they do. Having thought about it, they have decided beforehand that it is not something they are comfortable with, so they do not do it at all. If they had taken Paul's advice here not to question themselves (and thence feel bad about it), then they might have long since accepted the real challenge facing all Christians, to witness to their faith!

Within Paul's letter to the Corinthians lies one small point that is lost in translation, however good the translation. Nearly all mention of 'judgment', 'assessment', 'evaluation' (etc.) up to this point has been by way of translating the Greek word 'anakrinos'. If we take the illustration of a court of law then this will help us understand the word and its use, for technically, the word referred to the many judgements and assessments made in the course of presenting a court case. Such judgements were quite different from the final 'judgement' rendered by a court, which went by the Greek name 'krinos'. So when Paul said at the end of verse 4 'it is only the Lord who examines me', the word used here again is 'anakrinos', and Paul therefore said that the only judgment and evaluation he accepted in this life came from the Lord, not from other people, not even from himself. He would not wallow in either the joy of praise or the agony of condemnation, nor flounder in self congratulation or self pity. This is a good rule for us.

When the Lord comes (4:5)

We are bidden by Paul to stop passing judgement on the proclamation of the Gospel 'until the Lord has come' (4:5). There are a great many real secrets within the human heart, and the evil one has laid hold of different parts of most people's lives; this is what it means to be human and to be living in this world. Not even we can sort out our own feelings or fully understand our own motives; most people do not see, for example, how their actions and responses can be very similar to their parents'!

There is only one final 'krinos', the great judgment of God that settles everything, and reveals all evil and everything hidden, whether in us or in others. Paul would not have been so arrogant as to say that he was without faults, or un-afflicted by the trials of life, or untouched the mysteries of personality and the inner life that bewilder each of us at times. He knew that before God, each of us will be finally judged and the quality of our work for the Lord will be assessed, finally, and we will await God's approval. This judgement, of course, is not God's judgement on our souls, for we will only stand before our God by the mercy of Christ and by faith in Him. Nevertheless, this text tells us that we face a judgment on all our work, and it is the only one that counts.

It is my experience that many Christians I meet feel that this is a matter for debate, and they like to discuss it alongside a welter of other issues about the coming of God's glory and the return of Christ. God's judgement has become a matter of human debate, just as the Corinthians, so many years ago debated the merits of the Gospel preached by Paul, Apollos and Cephas (Peter). How tragic! Can we not accept that if God is God, then we finally answer to Him and Him alone?

Discipleship

Application

Any of us who have read 1 Corinthians knows that there are many chapters to go and many subjects to be covered before the end of the letter. Yet it is very important that Paul starts here. You could argue that the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are Paul's way of emphasising the importance of the proclamation of the Gospel, and he chose to attack the divisions within the church because it served his Gospel purposes to do so! The Gospel was all important to Paul, but is this true within the church today?

When Paul speaks in differing ways about the importance of the Gospel within this letter, it seems to me to have little to do with what we call preaching today, because preaching has become an art form by which church leaders speak to their congregations. This may include some discussion of a Biblical text and some element of a message from the Lord. Even if the preacher appealed to people to accept faith in Jesus Christ, Sunday after Sunday, most would question whether this was a realistic way to address the Gospel to the world. Today, people will even pick and choose their church, dare I say, with a rather 'Corinthian spirit' on the basis of which leaders and preachers they either like or accept!

The proclamation of the Gospel has always happened when individual Christians naturally witness to those around them and have the courage to explain their faith to those who ask them; but too many feel so de-skilled in this they do not dare use their natural abilities. The fruit of such evangelism may be rare, but is rich and welcome. There are those however, in every generation, who have been gifted by God to speak the Gospel in new and different situations often against the advice or the opinions of others (especially other Christians). Their work invariably establishes new churches because those who are converted have no real connection with the life and cultures of existing churches, and today, they are often accused of creating division. If you know your church history, you will see this pattern easily within early Methodism, for example, and other such movements.

It is to us within the church that Paul's advice is spoken so clearly; 'stop passing judgement before time, until the Lord has come ...' Frankly, the world is full of so many opportunities for the spreading of the Gospel, we have not yet understood how open it is to the true message of salvation! I suggest that if we take our courage by reading what Paul says here, we will be more able to throw off the shackles of officialdom, free ourselves from bondage to our own self image, and accept the high calling of being a 'steward of the mysteries of God'. There are few who cannot become true proclaimers of the Gospel today; it is just that we have not believed that we can or we should, and the devil has whispered in our ears that we are not good enough, and we have believed it!

Questions for groups

1. Are you a 'steward of the mysteries of God'? Why is it that many people who go to church would not aspire to this or allow it to be said of them?
2. How do we know the judgements of God which help us decide whether we are doing what is right for Him?
3. What works of Gospel initiative are awaiting us right now?

Discipleship challenges

- *Do you see yourself as someone who is able to proclaim the Gospel, and if not, why not? What can you do to either support or do the work of the proclamation of the Gospel where you live?*
- *Is Christ spoken about in your family, at meal time? During the course of an evening, or in the form of a blessing at the end of a day? Pray about appropriate ways of including Christ within your family routines that testifies to your faith, unashamedly.*

Final Prayer

Heavenly Father, reassure us of Your constant love. In weakness, we stumble and fall from the heights for which You have made us. When we look to You, lift us up, that we may see again the glory for which You have made us, and for which, in Your strength, we live. In Jesus' name we ask this; AMEN