

Prayers

To God

Before the Lord, let yourself stop thinking about your fears. Give yourself permission to focus exclusively on your hopes, and let the Lord your God empower you to believe that your hopes and dreams are indeed some part of His vision for you and for your life.

For myself

Weekly theme: generosity

Almighty Father; great and mighty God; You have showed Yourself to me and I have responded, and yet I have not always responded as You would want of me. Help me to stop and truly listen to Your heart as it is revealed to me, so that instead of merely doing your will when I feel like it, I begin to follow You exclusively, as I know I must. Give me the courage to do this I pray: AMEN

For others

As you go about your day, say brief intercessory prayers for the people you see and meet, as you are led. If there are too many such people, then do this for those who are drawn to your attention by the Holy Spirit.

Meditation

The freshness of each new day reveals the blessings
And the gifts of God given to those who will receive them:

The value of precious moments spent in reading the Word;
The challenge of sustaining the work we have been given to do;
The chance to be creative in the path of discipleship and service;
The excitement of knowing that Christ has more for us each day;
The treasure of moments of quiet peace which refresh the soul;
The privilege of living the life of Christ, and helping the poor;
The freedom of prayer to bless other people and the whole world;
And the opportunity to love again, where yesterday we failed;

What can we possibly do to give thanks for all of this?
We can turn to the Lord of all to praise Him, now and always!

Bible Passage

1 Cor 4:1-21

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.

⁶ Now I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, fellow believers, so that you may learn from us not to go beyond what is written, and so that none of you will take unnecessary pride in one over against the other. ⁷ Who passes judgement on you? What do you have that you have not received? Also, if you received it, why do you boast as if it was not something received?

⁸ You already have sufficient! Already you have prospered! Without us, you have become kings, though I wish you really did rule so that we might be kings with you! ⁹ For I imagine that God has placed us apostles last of all, as those condemned to death, for we have been made into a show for the world to see for angels and people alike. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are respected, and we are despised! ¹¹ Up to this very moment we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are roughly treated, and we are homeless; ¹² we grow weary working with our own hands. Being cursed, we bless; being persecuted, we endure, ¹³ being slandered, we beg to be heard. At this very moment, we have become like the rubbish of the world, the scum of the universe.

¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children.

Review

At its heart, this passage of Scripture is about the relationship between a Christian leader and a church. Paul founded the church at Corinth, and it had blossomed and grown, but within that growth some problems were beginning to emerge. We have already read about the divisions in the church (1:10-17, 3:1-9), but Paul now begins to dig deeper into it what was happening there, and it is not a pretty picture!

There are some fascinating texts within this passage, though the first few verses (4:1,2) may seem at first to contain little of significance. However, Paul is preparing to defend himself when he says of his own group of missionaries that they are, *'servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God'* (4:1). He is not so much being proud as putting forward the truth as he sees it, and this phrase is a remarkably concise statement of the true spiritual qualities of a Christian leader, focussed around the principles of service.

Christian leaders - the office of 'steward' as one who serves

There is a great deal in Jesus' teaching and the Bible in general about servanthood (e.g. Isaiah 42:1, Matt 12:18f. etc.), emphasising submission to the Father's will (Hebrews 12:9, James 4:7) and also liberty to act using spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12). However, there is not so much in scripture about what it means to be *'stewards'*. The Biblical word here is the same used in the Old Testament of Joseph when he was entrusted with the affairs of Potiphar; indeed, the NIV uses the word *'entrusted'* here (*'those entrusted with the secret things of God'* - 4:1), but this translation lacks the sense of a steward as one whose service of a group of people is done through holding office. As far as I know, Methodists are the only Christians to use this Biblical term to describe those who, with the minister, have the responsibility of church leadership!

The office here is that of one who serves and is commissioned to make sure that things are done properly according to the Gospel and the *'mysteries of God'* but what does this mean? There can be no doubt that this refers to the Gospel itself, which Paul has only just described as *'God's secret wisdom'* (1 Cor 2:7). The Gospel is therefore the mysteries of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and the primary role of church stewards is to be agents of the Gospel, to which they must be dedicated, and found trustworthy (4:2).

Put your trust in God, not gossip

The next paragraph describes Paul's grief that the Corinthians were questioning his integrity as one of these *'stewards'* of the Gospel (4:3-5). He knows what he has done for the Gospel, and he knows he has given his life for this. He is dedicated to the Lord and is willing to stand before God and accept His judgement on his integrity. Nevertheless, the point here is this; where people in the church gossip their opinions about the intentions of their leaders and the nature of their preaching, the devil creates division and strife within Christian fellowship. This is clearly what grieved Paul about the Corinthian church, and he is willing to place his life and his ministry in the hands of God who alone is Judge *'it is the Lord who examines me'* (4:4). Paul begs the church to turn again to the Gospel message to which he is faithful and stop being consumed with critical gossip. He is content to say bluntly that he accepts the Lord's judgement *'when the Lord has come'* (4:5), and His light pierces the darkness to reveal truth (4:5).

Paul's message is not that everyone should meekly accept what their leaders say, but to put a stop to malicious opinion and place such things in God's hands. So when we struggle at church with issues and with people, we too must place our trust in God as our Judge.

The problems of a critical spirit

Paul now appeals to the Corinthians to put a stop to their divisive and opinionated attitudes towards himself and Apollos (4:6) in particular. He turns the matter back on the Corinthians; they have criticised him, but, '*who then passes judgement on you?*' (4:7). In this way he exposes the flaw at the heart of critical gossip; it is one-sided, and often unable to hear or accept the same standards of analysis and proof it tries to place on others. Critical gossip compounds unhealthy and one-sided views as those who hold them amplify each others opinions without the correction of someone else challenging what they believe, and it is a frequent consequence of division, in which people of like mind become entrenched in their own views. Paul cannot understand why God's people should want to hold on to a critical spirit of this nature, because it draws people away from looking on Christ; he says, '*why do you boast?*' (4:7). But it is time for him to be specific about their sins, and avoid sounding too judgemental himself!

The bigotry at the heart of the church in Corinth

In the next paragraph, 4:8-13, Paul makes a subtle attack on the sins of the Corinthian church, but because of what he has just said, he is careful to avoid sounding critical or bigoted himself. So when he says, '*You already have sufficient! Already you have prospered! ... You have become kings!*' (4:8), this is a rather tongue-in-cheek comment, which reads far clearer in Greek than in English. This is because such things were exactly what the Corinthian church were claiming for themselves! They thought they knew the Gospel completely ('*sufficient*') and the evidence of their prosperity meant that God was with them and they needed no correction from Paul (they had '*prospered*'); they believed that no one had the right to point out their sins; they were their own authority, and Christ had already appointed them '*Kings*'!

The ministry of an 'apostle' - foolishness for Christ

But Paul will have none of this. His ministry is radically different to the 'success-orientated' attitudes common in Corinth. So he paints a contrary picture of true godliness. As an apostle, he seeks to be 'like' Jesus, his Lord; despised, rejected and the '*last of all*' (4:9). He takes the imagery of '*wisdom and foolishness*' he has already used to promote the Gospel (1:18-2:1), to teach that those who claim to possess all wisdom are worldly; '*we are fools for Christ ... you are so wise!*' (4:10). With his companions, he is unashamed to be identified with Christ in weakness.

This is a powerful argument. Paul's remarkable phrase, '*fools for Christ*' then becomes a trigger for the almost embarrassing disclosure of his life and circumstances, '*you are respected, we are despised ... we go hungry ... we are in rags ... we are homeless ... the rubbish of the world*' (4:11). Is Paul overplaying his hand through exaggeration here? We can think this only if we think he is lying, perhaps for effect, but this would be to destroy the entire argument; if he was lying people would have known it and few would have then accepted this letter as Scripture!

Paul is moving carefully towards more specific criticisms of the Corinthians

In truth, Paul is slowly becoming more blunt about sin, and we will discover that in the coming chapters, Paul is unafraid to address the most difficult of moral and practical issues in the life of the church (chapters 5f.). But we should not forget that as a man of God, Paul does not ask people for sympathy or any support that would take the focus away from Christ. Far from it; he is frank about what it means to live the life of an apostle, with all its difficulties (4:10-13), so people might know the truth that leadership in the church is not about glamour and worldly success. It is about being a '*steward*' of God's grace, and in this way, Paul fulfils his duty to '*warn ... my dear children*' of Corinth (4:14). Watch this space!

Discipleship

Application

Corinth and the church of today

It is very hard to read this passage and not notice some similarities between the Corinthian church and the life of some churches today. Church leaders need to be measured against the standards of stewardship Paul sets out here, as well as against other well known texts (e.g. from 1 Timothy). Churches, in particular in the West, need to look carefully at this scripture to make sure their emphasis on prosperity, however well based on scriptural promises of God's provision, does not fall foul of this plain call for honesty and simple clarity in living and preaching the Gospel, including poverty as a natural consequence of being dedicated to God's work. This scripture needs our careful attention.

Dealing with difficult issues

It is very tempting for us to pray that the problems of the church will fall away, and seek to hand things over to God for Him to do everything for us. But no, we must face God's call requiring us to be for Him to use us to put things right. Paul could have prayed that the Corinthian church be 'self-corrected' by the Spirit. Yet he did more than this, he allowed himself to become God's agent of change. He was willing to challenge what was wrong in God's name. How many are willing to do this today? The Lord needs His people to do His will, right now.

Ideas for what to do

- *Write down a list of the similarities between the Corinthian church and your own. What should be done about this?*
- *Pray for your church leaders, and ask the Lord to bless them in the difficulties and successes of their ministry*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage teach us about the church today?
2. What are the qualities of a church leader according to this text?
3. How may the church avoid malicious gossip about godly things, including its leadership and the style of worship

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