

Prayers

Opening prayer

Glory, honour, power and praise be to You, Lord Jesus Christ. You know all things, and You understand our lives and You know our need of forgiveness. Thank You for the attention You pay to our lives, and give us the gifts and graces we need to go about our daily work with joy, and with confidence that You hold our lives in Your hands. Your graciousness is amazing and we praise you, Lord Jesus Christ; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: FARMING

1. For yourself

Praise God for the blessing of food to eat, and pray that everyone, across the world, will have enough to eat

2. For your friends and family

Praise God for your family, and name them one by one before God. Ask the Lord to provide each one with the spiritual sustenance they need as well as their earthly food.

3. For the church and its work

Praise God for your church, and give thanks for the work it does that reaches out to the poor.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray especially for farming communities ravaged by modern 'plagues' or drought. Pray for those who will have the hard work of deciding what to hold back so that it can be the 'seed' for next year's crops. Pray that seed will be readily available for those who face problems.

Meditation

For those who have eyes that are open to see
And want to find the truth about God and Jesus;
Salvation is for those who own His name,
And judgment comes to those who burden the poor;
Blessings fall on people who seek to do good,
And curses fall on people who choose to do evil;
Deliverance comes to all who trust in Him,
And bondage awaits all who love their own ways;
The Kingdom grows where God's will is done,
And His justice arrives to set the captives free;
So let all people turn to look at God's Word
And let everyone yield to His plan of Redemption.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Timothy 5:23-6:2

²³ Do not drink only water, but take a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent ailments. ²⁴ The sins of some people are evident and go ahead of them to judgment, but those of others appear later. ²⁵ Likewise, good works are obvious; and others cannot remain hidden.

^{6:1} Let all who are under the yoke of service as slaves regard their masters as worthy of all respect, so that the name of God and the doctrines may not suffer abuse. ² Those who have masters who believe must not regard them with any less respect because they are in fellowship; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit from their service are believers, and loved. Teach and urge these things.

Review

Paul continues to give Timothy rather unrelated words of advice; nevertheless, they give us a feel of the humanity of the communication and a possible insight into some of the issues affecting the life of the early church. The passage starts with some quaint advice to Timothy to be less abstemious and drink some wine, for the sake of his stomach. Paul was certainly of the opinion that there were medical benefits to what we might call 'drinking in moderation'! He went on to speak rather enigmatically about the way in which sins and problems within the church are sometimes obvious and sometimes not; we will see shortly whether there may have been a reason for this comment of Paul. Lastly, Paul writes about slavery and the specific circumstances of slaves and their masters being in fellowship together. It raises some interesting issues not just to do with slavery!

We already know that slavery was an issue which caused some unease in the early church (6:1,2), because it is mentioned in a number of New Testament letters (1 Peter 2:18f, Ephesians 5:5f. and Col 3:22f.). The general attitude of Peter and Paul was that slavery was part of the social fabric of the day and it would be unwise to disrupt this for fear of compromising the Gospel and the church. In their day, vast numbers of people lived in forms of slavery and service within the Roman Empire, and if the church had challenged this, the antagonism of the Empire would have been shown in swift and brutal persecution. The apostles felt that the infant church was not at that time in a place to change society except by the proclamation of the Gospel alone. We cannot fault their judgement, because the news of Jesus Christ did eventually change the Roman Empire and the whole world. Tragically, it took too long for the worst forms of slavery to be legally banned, though as we know today, all kinds of illegal slavery has always existed, and of a far more shocking nature than that found in Roman times.

The issue within this passage is whether a master and a slave who were part of the same church might have a different kind of working relationship because of their fellowship in Christ. In those days there were no competing denominations to enable some to go to a church in one place, and others to attend a church elsewhere. As far as we know, all the Christians in one town or place were regarded as one fellowship, and were likely to meet together. Paul therefore gave carefully measured advice, saying that the only difference being a Christian should make was that the slave, through Christ, should aspire to a higher standard of service for the master! We may think this is somewhat biased, but it is worth remembering that one whole letter of the New Testament, Philemon, contains Paul's pleading to a master (Philemon) to apply a higher standard of personal behaviour towards a slave (Onesimus), and in terms of scripture, this redresses the balance. Paul's general position was that for any Christian, the presence of Christ should inspire them to higher standards in whatever service they performed or life they lived. This is the best message we can take from this passage.

Paul's advice to Timothy about taking a little wine (5:23) is hardly more than well meaning health advice. It is probably true that wine would have helped someone who normally drank water, because water was not purified in Roman times and it contained more potential water-borne health risks than fermented grape juice. Through the years, the church has often offered health advice, as a way of extending the healing ministry. In this instance, we have no real knowledge of Timothy's ailments, so we would be wise not to place much emphasis on the advice. It is best if we ensure that any health advice the church offers is moderate and accurate; moreover, the church should always seek to practice the ministry of healing given by Jesus in His commission (e.g. see Matt 10:1f.).

Lastly, Paul's comment about people's sins in verse 24 seems a little obscure, but it is easy to understand. It is his way of describing the observable fact that some sins are evident when they happen and some are only discovered later. Paul then states the obvious sequel, which is that the same is true of good deeds demonstrating faith. There seems to be no clear reason for the comments however, for although it would naturally follow Paul's advice to Timothy about keeping discipline in the church (5:17-24), it seems odd coming after Paul's advice about drinking wine! We cannot fully explain this, but it may be that by saying this to Timothy (5:24,25), he was wisely advising him that no church leader can deal with all the problems of a congregation; many will only be sorted out, as he says, when they reach 'judgment' (5:24).

This reading comes across as a hotchpotch of comments, but taken carefully, they each yield helpful advice.

Discipleship

Questions for groups

1. To what extent should Christians seek to look after their health as a form of obligation to God or a witness to the faith?
2. Discuss in your group the difference between sins which are 'obvious' and sins which remain hidden. How can Christians help each other with sins that remain hidden?
3. Why does slavery persist in parts of the world today and in what forms. What can the church do about this?

Discipleship challenges

- *Investigate where slavery exists in our world today by whatever means you have at your disposal; newspapers, internet, etc. Discuss this with Christian or non-Christian friends and search for ways of making a difference and tackling these issues.*
- *Fast and pray about the issue of personal health amongst Christians, and pray that they will appreciate the wisdom of scriptural advice to look after oneself as part of the testimony of faith.*

Final Prayer

When we struggle to understand things, heavenly Father, break through the fog of our difficulties and enable us to perceive Your ways. Shine a light into our lives, and into our minds our feelings and our thoughts, so that we may begin to understand what You are saying to us about how to make things better. Heavenly Father, You are our one true Light: AMEN
