

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for Your gifts:
for the gift of life and the energy to live it;
for the gift of love and the people to share it;
for the gift of faith and the time to exercise it;
for the gift of grace and the freedom to enjoy it;
for the gift of salvation and the grace to receive it;
Lord Jesus Christ; thank You for Your generosity. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

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

Confess your sins to the Lord. Do not delay and imagine that you can avoid these things, just accept that you must deal with them before God. If you are able to follow this advice, you may find that your life will change for the better!

On-going prayers

- **Pray about 'holidays'**. *Pray for your own holidays this year, whatever you have decided to do.*
- *Give thanks to God for the power of His love and for the fact that He holds you in existence every moment of your life. Remember, there is no moment in which God is not actively involved in what you are doing; this is not threat, it is a beautiful fact of life as God has made it.*
- *Pray for Syria and the continuing unrest in this country. Pray for nationals living in other parts of the world who long to see the strife come to an end.*

Meditation

Why do some who have authority wield it harshly,
When they will only be loved for using it wisely?

Why do some who lead us think words are so important
When those who achieve the most speak little?

Why do some like to take authority to themselves,
When the true authority is given only by God?

Why do some like to imagine they are above all criticism,
When they have no merit above others, before God?

Why do some who lead the church insist they know God's will,
When Jesus said 'the first will be last', and meant it?

Why do some try to be God, instead of aspiring to be like Him?
Do they want to be persecuted and crucified?

Dear God, please save us from ourselves and our pretensions ...
Open human hearts to the wise guidance of Your Word.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 3:18-23

¹⁸ Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks you are wise in this age, then you should become 'fools' in order to become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written:

'He traps the wise in their craftiness';

²⁰ and again,

'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are worthless.'

²¹ So then, no more boasting about people! All things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all are yours, ²³ and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

Review

This is only a short passage of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, but it is very important. It draws together Paul's attack on the folly of divisions within the Corinthian church with his thoughts about the wisdom of God (3:18-20). In these reflections, Paul writes powerfully about what it means to be dependent on the wisdom of God (3:18) rather than individual human leaders (3:21), and he clarifies this with references to two passages of Scripture; Job 5:12,13. and Psalm 94:11. Both quotes reinforce the call to look to God for all wisdom and understanding, and point to the folly of the Corinthians for following their earthly leaders.

Paul begins by imploring the Corinthians '*do not deceive yourselves*' (3:18). He had already laid out the folly of their ways and wanted them to heed his call. The Corinthians believed themselves to be full of the Holy Spirit and wise in all things (2:14-16), but Paul had presented them with powerful arguments against their divisions. He emphasised that Christ was at the centre of the Gospel in which they all believed (1:24-31,), he gave evidence from Scripture of the supremacy of God's plan, revealed through the Holy Spirit (2:10-13), and he reminded the Corinthians that because God had used him to bring them the Gospel, they should listen to him (3:1). He also warned the Corinthians that all who preached the Gospel were the Lord's servants in the building of His 'Temple' (3:10-17) and should be honoured as such. Who then would think that they knew better!

It seems that what had happened in Corinth was something like this. The people who had become Christians had not entirely ditched some of the pagan practices with which they were familiar. Many had been influenced by 'mystery' religions, as we saw in our earlier study of 2:6-13. As a result, some were constantly seeking what they thought were spiritual truths of greater importance than the Gospel they first heard. Some even thought that spiritual things such as the 'gifts of the Spirit' and the 'wisdom of God' were somehow their own possession; but how could they be? To bring this part of his letter to a conclusion Paul quoted two Old Testament Scriptures emphasising the supreme wisdom of God in all Creation.

The first quote is from Job 5, which contains a speech by Job's friend Eliphaz giving praise to God for His almighty power and authority. As with many quotes given in the Bible, they hint at much more, and the passage below gives a flavour of the book of Job at this point:

He gives rain on the earth and sends waters on the fields; he sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety. He frustrates the devices of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. He takes the wise in their own craftiness; and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end ... How happy is the one whom God reproves; therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For He wounds, but He binds up; He strikes, but His hands heal. (Job 5:9-18)

Certainly, this contains all the elements of Paul's appeal to the Corinthians; God is supreme and must be honoured in all things, His wisdom is inscrutable, therefore all God's people should be content to receive His discipline. His purpose is to mend problems so that God's people might be united in Him.

The second quote is from Psalm 94

The Lord knows our thoughts,
that they are but an empty breath (worthless).
Happy are those whom you discipline, O Lord,
and whom You teach out of Your law,
giving them respite from days of trouble,
until a pit is dug for the wicked.
For the Lord will not forsake His people;
He will not abandon His heritage;

for justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it. (Psalm 94:9-15)

Here again, a scan of the wider text shows that Paul does not give these quotes merely to harangue the Corinthians; he is pointing them to God's solutions. As this Psalm says, *'the Lord will not forsake His people and He will not abandon His heritage'*, so the future is good for those who yield to God's authority in Christ.

This, indeed, is the message of the last two verses of our text. The Christian possesses all the promises of God, all His blessing, His favours, His gifts and graces, and so much more. No wonder Paul says *'all things are yours'* (3:22). The Corinthians had understood such words incorrectly, but God's promises would remain sure. Paul emphasises; *'all things'* belong to those who are *'Christ's'* (3:23), for God has promised everything to Christ and Christ has given everything to those who by faith follow Him. Now, these words were spoken by Paul to conclude his argument against the divisions within the Corinthian church, but they are words of profound reassurance and comfort to all Christians today.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Wisdom and foolishness
- Paul's quotes from scripture
- 'You are Christ's, and Christ is God's'

Notes on the translation of the passage

V18 'if any one of you thinks you are wise ...'

The Greek says 'if anyone among you thinks he is wise ...' and Paul changes from the general 'you' to the more specific 'he'. However, the point Paul makes is entirely general, so I have translated the whole sentence in the general designation 'you'.

V19 'foolishness in God's sight'

The Greek says 'the wisdom of this world is foolishness alongside God', and there is in the word 'alongside', a sense of comparison or observation. For this reason, 'in God's sight' is the closest we can get to this idea in English.

V20 '... that the thoughts of the wise are worthless'

The Greek says 'the Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are worthless. However, this is not normal English speech, hence the slight change in the word order to make sense.

V20 'the wise'

The ancient manuscripts of this are divided, with some reading 'man' here instead of 'wise'. The translation "man" would indeed be correct according to the Psalm (94:11) 'the Lord knows the thoughts of man ...'. However, a careful reading of the corrections made in these ancient manuscripts seem to suggest that the original written by Paul was in fact 'the wise'; but later copyists, knowing that Paul was quoting from Psalm 94:11 corrected his words according to what they knew of the psalm. It is a delicate quandary, for should we not also correct Paul if he misquoted scripture? I have decided to stick with what most people accept as the likely original from Paul's pen.

Wisdom and foolishness

The advice of Paul is clear, if you want to become wise, then become 'fools' (3:18). What we cannot see is that the term 'fools' was being used in the first century not merely in meaning what we might call 'idiotic'. Jesus used this when he said 'do not call anyone "you fool"' (Matt 5:22), because the word in Israel and Samaria was used as a form of insult. In Greek culture, however, something different was happening, and as the various Greek philosophies developed, the predominately Stoic philosophers of the first century began to use the term 'fool' in Greek ('*moros*', from which we get the word moron) but in a different and technical way. It was used in a partly derisory way for anyone who opposed Stoic philosophy, and in some parts of the wider Roman Empire where the Greek language was used, the word 'fool' commonly implied opposition rather than ignorance.

With this in mind, and remembering that Paul had spent some time in Athens listening to such philosophy (Acts 17), it is perhaps reasonable for us to suggest that Paul included this meaning within what he said here. If this is the case, then when Paul said 'become "fools" in order to become wise', he did not mean that people had to give up their minds and become idiots for Christ. No, he meant that they had to oppose the worldly wisdom of Greek philosophy, and do so actively, using every active faculty of their minds!

This is why Paul suggested that the Christians at Corinth turn to the Bible in order to understand God's wisdom. The foolishness of God was His opposition to the things of this world, not his ignorance of it, and so we are invited by the scriptures to work hard at getting to know God's mind and opposing the world!

Paul's quotes from scripture

The first quote is from Job 5:

He thwarts the plans of the crafty, so that their hands achieve no success. He catches the wise in their craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are swept away. (Job 5:12,13)

As with all quotes from Job, it is possible to get the interpretation of such a passage quite wrong unless we know who is speaking. The book of Job is divided up between speeches by Job and his friends. In these speeches, Job defends himself justly from the charge of his friends that he must have sinned in some way for God to have punished him so severely (according to the well known story of Job 1 and 2). The speeches of Job's friends sound extremely convincing and are based on traditional Israelite thought, but prove to be completely contrary to God's ways! In this passage, the words are not from Job, but the quote is from the speech of Job's friend Eliphaz, who is trying to suggest to Job that he has been a little too wise for his own good and has been found out, and that is why God has punished him! We who read the quote must remember that eventually, God justified Job at the end of the story (Job 42), declared that Eliphaz and his friends were wrong, and asked Job to pray for them!

In the light of this, and the fact that the people of Paul's day knew their Old Testament better than we do, I suggest that Paul's quote here raised some wry smiles. The whole book of Job demonstrates that human wisdom is a slippery entity, and even Israelites and Jews easily misunderstood it. Yet God's authority is supreme over all creation (Job 38f.). In saying that God 'traps the wise in their own craftiness' Eliphaz had spoken correctly about God's nature but not understood that he was the one condemned by his own words! In just the same way, Paul said that the Corinthians intended well, but misunderstood God's ways just as Job's friends had placed their hopes in intellectual arguments about God rather than actual faith in God.

Psalm 94:11 says this (and I include the verses each side of the quoted text):

Does he who disciplines nations not punish? Does he who teaches man lack knowledge? The LORD knows the thoughts of man; he knows that they are futile. Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law. (Psalm 94:10-12)

If we assume that people in Paul's day would have been more familiar with the setting of the quote Paul made, then the general theme of what is said here is relevant to the Corinthians. It appeals to the Corinthians to accept that God not only teaches but chastises, and to accept that knowledge and wisdom are created in a person by the discipline of God. What Paul was doing in his letter of course was offering the corrective discipline to the excesses of the Corinthians misunderstanding of God's graciousness.

'You are Christ's, and Christ is God's'

One thing comes clearly through all of Paul's letters and that is the sense of belonging he speaks about between God and Christ and His people. He often describes a genuine fellowship and togetherness between all these (for example, read the first chapter of Ephesians), and this appeared to Paul to be a truth as clear as daylight. This was what he wanted to get across to the Corinthians in order to draw them away from their dependency on individual leaders.

Having made his points about holy wisdom and human folly, he said 'So then, no more boasting about people! All things are yours ...' It appears that one of the things reported to Paul about the Corinthians was that they believed that they had discerned 'all things' (see 2:15) and possessed all knowledge relevant to salvation, and did not need scrutiny by anyone else (2:15,16). Paul turned the phrase 'we have all things' back to the Corinthians, as if to say 'you have me, and Apollos and Cephas, and much more ...' and appealed to his readers to receive again the Gospel of God that in Christ, death was defeated and new life was gained (this surely explains Paul's reference to 'life and death' - 3:22) . He also included the whole span of time from the present to the future in reminding them of what they had gained through the Gospel preached to them; not the past, of course, because for them that was lived 'in the world'. Everything, however, was theirs in Christ Jesus; what need did they therefore have for individual leaders and divisions within the church according to differing philosophies of religion?

Discipleship

Application

Our identity in Christ

At the heart of every true Christian beats a rhythm that is Christ, which has been placed there by God. It is surely the duty of all God's people to respond to that rhythm and get back in touch with the heart of faith which is Christ. This lies at the core of Paul's message to the Corinthians about their divisions and party spirit. The identity of God's people may be found in nothing other than Christ.

Consequently, our identity as Christians today can never be forged from church denominations, fellowship groups, church activities or the latest projects. These are the tools used to embrace and further faith, but the Christian is Christ's or nothing else. Now we all know this, but our deeds and actions, especially in worship, demonstrate all too often that we are enslaved to these things and pin too much on them. Many of God's people would not know what to do with themselves if their denominations were to collapse, or there were to be no evangelistic missions or other church projects to do. Because of this and because of our own divisions, it would perhaps be unwise of us to point the finger at the Corinthians; we too must hear Paul's rebukes within this letter.

We must therefore look carefully at the solutions Paul give to the problem of division. So far in this letter, He has suggested living by the Spirit, refocusing on Christ, and asking ourselves some sharp questions about our identity in God. It is somewhere to start. But should these things not be natural for God's people?

The Trinity –practical godliness?

Many theologians have commented on the very 'Trinitarian' nature of the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians. Paul refers to God frequently of course, and Jesus Christ as well, and he often speaks of the importance of the Holy Spirit. There is only a limited number of places in Scripture where all three are in close proximity, so this part of one Corinthians is an important point of research with those who wish to study the 'Trinity'.

Perhaps we should learn from this that any revitalisation of the church must account for all three. There are all kinds of programs available today to help God's people grow in faith and witness, but it is wise to have a good look at these to ensure that they have a balanced understanding of the authority of God, the witness of Jesus Christ, and the working power of the Holy Spirit. Why should we close the door on any of the means God uses to do His work.

Questions for groups

1. What does Scripture mean by asking us to become 'fools' and thus gain 'heavenly wisdom'? How can this help us reawaken the church today?
2. What of all the world's wisdom, is 'foolishness' in God's sight, and what are we talking about? Science, philosophy, religion, all knowledge?
3. Discuss whether verses 22 and 23 describe the church today. What does the phrase 'all things ... are yours' mean?

Discipleship challenges

- *Ask yourself whether any of your actions today have been foolish, and whether any have been truly wise. It can be difficult to try and make such a judgement, but it is a serious question that exposes a great deal about how we think about ourselves. Do this same exercise over several days without being too judgemental or getting too upset about it, and earnestly seeking the Lord's guidance. Then you may be able to spot some interesting patterns, and pray about how you can grow in godly discipleship.*
- *Pray for the church, especially for those within it who find it hard to separate what it means to be a Christian from what it means to be a 'Methodist', a 'Baptist', a 'Catholic' or any other separated fellowship or church.*

Final Prayer

We rest in You, great Lord of Creation. We rest in You, so that we may be refreshed and live our lives to do Your will. We rest in You to honour You and bless You, and to give You the praise and worship that is Your due. You are our God, and we praise You; You are our Redeemer and we praise You: AMEN
