

Prayer

Great Creator and majestic Lord, show us your power by restoring Your Church again. We are confident in You alone for this miraculous work, by which we will be empowered and encouraged in our faith; and if you need to use us, may we be responsive to Your call and humble enough to know our place. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Babies

Pray today for families and children who have the privilege of receiving a baby into their midst as 'family'. Pray about the way that 'family' is viewed within your society.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about magazines and their writers, editors social influence*
- *Pray for agricultural workers who move around to find work*
- *Give thanks to God for the glory and beauty of flowers*

Meditation

What do other religions try to tell us about God,
Which cannot be found through Christ Jesus our Lord –
When we place our whole confidence and trust in Him?

What can we do about the world's evil and pain,
And its stranglehold on everything, and everyone's future –
Except call on God who alone has authority?

In what can we trust for our complete, eternal salvation,
Apart from the death and resurrection of Jesus –
Which has set us free from the burden of sin?

How can we live our lives free from guilt and shame,
And be effective for right, truth, freedom and love –
Unless we give free reign to God's Spirit within?

Brothers and sisters,

We have a duty to know where we stand, day by day
As disciples of Christ, His body, the Church –
So when called to account, we know in whom we trust.

Bible Study - Philippians 4:8-14

⁸ *To finish with, my friends, set your minds on what is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely and commendable; by which I mean anything of excellence and worthy of praise.* ⁹ *Make it your business to the things you have learned, received, heard and seen from my example, and the God of peace will be with you.*

¹⁰ *I rejoice in the Lord greatly that you have now renewed your concern for me, finally being able to show this after previously having no chance.* ¹¹ *I do not say this because of my need; for I have learned to live within the limits of whatever*

state I find myself. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In each and every situation I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of living with plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through the One who strengthens me. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, it was good of you to share in my distress.

Review

In most of Paul's letters, he takes some time to finally come to an end, and appears to keep adding things as if to say just one thing more before signing off. As well as here in this passage, you can see another example of this in the protracted ending of Romans, which takes a chapter and a half (15:13-16:27) to conclude! You might have thought that the letter to the Philippians was adequately concluded at the end of yesterday's passage with the famous words 'the peace of God which passes all understanding ...' (4:7). However, the letter continues, with several more reflections and general points, each of which tell us just that little bit more about the great truths of God of which Paul wrote so easily, but they also tell us more about the circumstances of the letter and the people to whom he wrote. This passage, together with the last part of the letter (4:15-23 – which we will study next) is a patchwork of fascinating insights.

The first two verses of today's passage offer some good practical advice. It would be difficult for anyone, whether Christian or not, to disagree that the list of virtues Paul gave in verse 8 ('what is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely and commendable ') was not admirable in every respect, for what decent society of any kind could advocate anything other than the highest standards of truth, decency and excellence? Paul grew up as a Jewish Pharisee, but also as a Roman citizen in the town of Tarsus, famed for its Greek 'Stoic' teaching; and there is little doubt that Paul knew a great deal about this Greek philosophy as well as his own Jewish heritage. Stoicism taught the control of all human feelings by strict discipline and adherence to 'virtues' (such as truth and justice) despite any worldly difficulties a person might face. Yet even if Paul wrote of these virtues in a way that reminds us of Stoicism, he did so not as any form of secular teaching, but as part of the Gospel of truth for which he given His life. Consequently, this is the clear message behind verse 9, which includes, almost hidden, a technical Greek word for something 'passed on' which you have yourself have first received from others. It is translated as 'received', but this little word serves to remind us that Paul believed he was not passing on good teaching for the sake of it; he was passing on the eternal Gospel of truth so that, as he said at the end of verse 9, people might find 'peace' with God (4:9). Paul firmly believed he was acting like an intermediary; he was someone who had received a precious gift and was duty bound to pass it on to others after him.

That, itself, appears to have motivated Paul to write the next paragraph. If you read the main Bible study, you will discover that it is possible that there was a misunderstanding between Paul and the Philippian church about the gift they sent to him together with Epaphroditus (see 2:25-30) , and this may have been one reason for the writing of the letter. After half thanking the Philippians for the gift and half saying that he was quite able to account for himself (4:10-12), Paul appears to have found some peace about the issue by placing it in God's hands (4:13). In this, Paul was an example of his own teaching, for he was content in 'every situation' (4:12) even though his circumstances in jail could hardly have been pleasant. This grace, however, was only possible for those who had yielded themselves to the Lord (4:13), and who found their strength in Him. Paul was a living example of the teaching he gave, and this is why we are able to trust His words as we find them in scripture.

Going Deeper

- *Go for a long walk or give yourself time to relax and listen to the Lord. Ask Him to help you find peace within the complex situations you find yourself in now. He will be faithful!*

Final Prayer

Great Lord, the smile of Your face means everything to me; for You have granted me to see Your face, hear Your voice, feel Your touch and speak to You in faith; not with the perfection I will know in Heaven, but with sufficient reality to know for sure that You care, and all things are possible through You. Thank You, Lord, AMEN

It is not always possible to follow Paul's train of thought, but sometimes we should be wary of trying to analyse the text too much. What he wrote was a heartfelt expression of the Gospel for which he had given his life, and for which he was imprisoned. This must be our guiding principle as we study his words further, for it enables us to find the truth which is there within all he says.

Fill your minds ...

In the past, much has been made of the list of virtues Paul quotes in verse 8; '*true, honourable, just, pure, lovely and commendable*'. One book I read in preparation for this study positively relished the fact that these qualities were standard Stoic 'classics', being values that anyone can identify with, Christian or not! How strange that anyone should rejoice to separate out a few words of sacred text and find in them some general appeal, when the text has no focus at all unless we read it as the Word of God! Certainly, Greek philosophers and modern secularists might well value all that Paul mentions, but these are all qualities that come from the nature of our Creator God. They are all available within the world, but it is only through Jesus and His Gospel that they find their highest expression in human life. For example, everyone might claim to value truth, but absolute truth is something that philosophers and scientists have argued about for centuries even though, obviously and logically, if God made everything then He must be the source of all truth.

Each virtue in Paul's list is in fact something that people in different times and places have valued in principle, but have failed to agree upon or achieve. Another example is 'justice'. Yes, everyone supports justice in principle, but it does not take too much observation to discover that what some people value as justice is very different from what others demand, and the world is full of the conflicts that flow from such divisions. Only when justice is understood as a property of Almighty God can we begin to aspire to any absolute standards of right or wrong.

People, of course, also understand purity in very different ways; the Greek word used means 'innocence' or 'holiness'. History is full of examples of people who have maintained that they have some kind of special holiness or purity (the Emperor Nero claimed that he was 'holy!'), yet such claims, when made, always sound hollow. Real holiness is surely a gift of God, and is something most valued when observed rather than claimed. The next word 'lovely' is special as well, and does not merely refer to something 'beautiful' or 'nice'. Strictly, it is a quality that draws love 'out of people'; as, for example, when a severely disabled child smiles and delights in simple gestures of touch or laughter, thereby drawing out of people around them qualities of love that might otherwise be hidden.

All these words deserve care and attention, and Paul sums them up as aims of 'excellence' which are 'worthy of praise'. There is no ambiguity here. Talking exclusively about behaviour which is worthy of those who 'press on towards ... the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus' (3:14), he is unashamed to identify them as his intended example (4:9), and asks us to make them our aim as well.

It is worth noting Paul's instruction that the way to embrace these virtues is to 'set your mind' on them. Too often, when assisting people who seek prayer for things that are troubling them, I have discovered that people have a wide variety of things occupying their minds. Whilst praying for them, if I then ask them about what they are thinking, they may tell me of a wide variety of things churning away in their minds; everything from the next meal to worries about what someone they barely know thinks about them at church on Sunday. Some counsellors advocate 'emptying the mind', as if that were ever possible for any of us (unless we are devotees of Buddhism or yoga)! The scriptures, here and in other places, suggest that our souls are find peace by being filled, not empty, with excellence and loveliness, and the guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit (Phil 4:9,10, Col 3:2, Rom 12:2,

15:13). To fill one's mind with what is good, and the practical advice about how to do this by reading scripture and books of genuine spiritual worth, can often begin a work of healing in someone of real need.

A little misunderstanding

Earlier in his letter, where Paul took time to commend both Timothy and Epaphroditus to the Philippian church, asking that they be accepted as two 'workers for the Gospel' (2:19-30) we saw from the details of these verses that there may have been some misunderstanding about Epaphroditus' mission to Paul, bringing a gift from the church. It is fairly clear at least, that Epaphroditus nearly lost his life (2:27) and the Philippian church was uncertain as to whether their generous gift had reached its intended recipient (2:27,28)!

In verses 10-12, Paul wrote strangely. It is hard to translate this, because no translator wants to leave readers of God's Word with sentences that are difficult to understand because they are incomplete or unstructured. However, the Greek is not at all clear, and I have done my best to translate it in an understandable fashion. It is highly likely that this reflects Paul's embarrassment, perhaps because of the gift he received from the church. On the one hand, he attempted to fulfil his duty to convey thanks to the givers 'I rejoice in the Lord greatly ...' (4:10), yet he talks more darkly about them 'previously having no chance'. It is a comment we might easily pass over because we do not really know all the details of what happened, but Paul went on to say very clearly that he was able to be content in 'each and every situation' (4:12). Now if you had given someone a substantial gift because you understood they were in need, and they replied in this way, you might wonder what they really meant!

Paul does however end this passage by graciously saying thanks again (4:14), but the impression of misunderstanding does not go away!

The secret of contentment

If anything, Paul resolved the misunderstanding in his usual way, by turning what he had to say into a wonderful and memorable description of how it was possible to depend upon God, and God alone, for all things. We saw yesterday how Paul took the words of Jesus about 'not worrying' (Matt 6:25ff) and encouraged his readers to turn them into prayers of petition which would bring 'the peace of God ...' (4:7). In this passage, he graphically set out the practical approach to life in which worry could be laid aside. It is a remarkable code of life and one that does not come from the Stoicism he learned about in his youth, because it talks of being content according to the circumstances of life (4:12). True Stoics did not talk of contentment because for them, life was a matter of discipline and fortitude in the face of all odds. No, Paul had left that all behind, along with his Pharisaic legalism and Jewish pride (3:7). In Christ he had found something new which enabled him to speak of things no Jew or Stoic could; he wrote 'in each situation I have learned the secret ...' and spoke of accepting the circumstances he faced with a peaceful heart; 'I can do all things through the One who strengthens me' (4:13).

Paul described this contentment with his circumstances as a gift of God; he called it a 'secret' (4:12), but as with everything to do with Paul's faith, it was an open secret and one he wished to share with all. These verses (4:11-13) stand as a test of Christian discipleship; for too often, a follower of the Lord we know will either be someone who is rich, or someone who is relatively poor, but not one who has known both! How many times have we come across those whose lives are so dedicated to the Lord that they have experienced the extremes of life? On the one hand setting aside plenty for nothing, or finding a way through poverty with Christ to a place of plenty again, or doing both according to the mission and Gospel we proclaim?

Application

It is unquestionably true that the Gospel imperative is for the rich to give to the poor, and the poor to become rich in any and every way through Christ. Real life is of course very complex; but who of us can we say in all honesty that we have experienced both poverty and riches, and dealt with both in a godly way as Paul does? Money is often the cause of embarrassment, and may have been so in Paul's case as is partially evident in this letter, but it is surely something that the Lord would have His people be open about, and honest. Many Christian missionaries and workers have testified to the release of laying their earthly needs before God and also before other brothers and sisters in Christ. In so doing, their real needs have been met and they have been blessed; so much so that they have been strengthened in their ministry. Other good Christian folk have given their all, financially, to support the work of the church at times when no-one else would. They have therefore reaped a reward for the Kingdom that is immeasurable. May the Lord inspire us each according to our circumstances, to make need known in the body of Christ, and to meet it according to our resources.

The earlier verses of scripture also appeal to us to aspire to excellence, but in morality and ethics. I strongly suggest that we all find ways to move forward in filling our minds with the things of God. In England during the nineteenth century, common English was full of phrases that came from the Bible, because scriptures were taught in school. All manner of evil has changed that, but there is still a heritage of aspiration for goodness and excellence surviving in many countries, despite strong social pressures for speech that is more aggressive and personal gain. In every society, people need to be helped to fill their minds with the things of God; by spending time with the Lord, with His Word, through prayer, by reading quality books and by sharing fellowship with people who guide our spiritual understanding. The world is blessed by people who are at peace with God and whose minds are filled with what is good.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Look again at verse 8. Which qualities of moral excellence mentioned by Paul are most needed today?
2. Do you find it hard to ask for what you need, either materially or spiritually? If this is so, why? What social conventions prevent us from asking?
3. Do you find it hard to give what you should for the Lord? What social conventions help or prevent you from so doing?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The challenge to moral excellence is one that should always be before us, and is one that we should each take seriously. The issue of being content in all circumstances is twofold. Firstly, are we truly content in the state in which we find ourselves now, whether rich or poor? Secondly, can we in all honesty say that if life were to radically change, then we would deal in a godly way with whatever happened? The possibilities within each question are considerable! I certainly find them deeply challenging.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Read through this passage and focus on some of the discipleship issues as the Lord leads you. Pray and ask the Lord to help you understand which of them are issues which you need to address for yourself.*