

Prayers

Opening prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus for the gift of this day. Lead me through its joys and its trials, and guide me through everything that happens so that I come to understand something of Your will for me both today, and every day of my life. May I continue to praise You throughout the day, and grow stronger in faith each hour. All glory be to You Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

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

At the beginning of your day, say a brief prayer of thanks to God, and offer all that you do to His service.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the future of your country.** *Pray for your own country; for the many different peoples who have come together to make it up over the past. Pray that the different groups within the country will live at peace with each other and work together constructively for the common good*
- *Pray for those awaiting extradition, on whatever charges. Pray that this difficult area of international law will be enacted properly, and that all nations will respect human rights for both men and women*
- *Give thanks to God for your sight. Pray also for those who have lost sight either in one eye or in both, and whether partial loss or complete loss*

Meditation

It's not just philosophers who ponder 'who am I'?
For you and I still wonder why we live.
It's not enough to talk of flesh and blood,
Of brains and thoughts, intelligence and feeling.
Of life's experiences from youth until we die,
To end up saying, 'that's it, that's me!
This logic cannot tell me why I know 'myself',
Or why I do the many things I do;
Or why I feel the loving touch of God,
Or feel His Spirit, leading, working, helping,
And making deep within my soul, a heart
To serve my God and love all those around me?
But now I know; once touched by universal truth,
Twice born of the Creator's breath,
All else is mere description and experience,
Except the Spirit's gracious gifts
By which the re-created 'me' is brought to life
And everything is perfected in faith and hope and love.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 5:6-8

⁶ The reason for your boasting is not good. Surely you know that a small amount of yeast makes the whole batch of dough rise? ⁷ Clear out the old yeast so that you may be a new

batch of dough, for really, you are without yeast because Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us celebrate the festival not with the old yeast and not with the yeast of evil and wickedness, but with unleavened sincerity and truth.

Review

This brief passage is a fascinating. To begin with, it describes evil as like yeast in bread, and then after connecting this thought with the Passover meal, Paul encourages the Corinthians to discard the evil yeast that grows within, to place their hopes in Christ, and live in '*sincerity and wisdom*' (5:8). The message about getting rid of evil is obvious, but there is more to this passage than meets the eye. Yeast is mentioned several times in the Bible, but it does not always mean the same thing, and not all Christians will quickly spot why Paul jumps so quickly from talking about yeast to the Passover festival. We must explore these things a little more if we want to understand what Paul meant by encouraging the Corinthians to be '*a new batch of dough*' (5:7) and worship God with '*unleavened sincerity and truth*' (5:8).

To begin with, yeast is mentioned a number of times in the Bible. Firstly, it occurs in the book of Exodus, where God demands that the Israelites get rid of the leaven (meaning, 'yeast') in their bread before embarking on the escape from Egypt (Exodus 12:15,19f.). This act of removing yeast was ritualised in the Passover meal of remembrance, in which the Israelites were required to remove all yeast from the home before the meal as a sign of getting rid of the past and trusting wholly on God for the future (Exodus 13:7f.). It is not surprising that the Old Testament prophets then spoke of yeast when picturing evil within the life of God's people (Hosea 7:4, Amos 4:5), and by the time of the New Testament, the Jewish people had a proverb '*a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough*' (1 Cor 5:6, Galatians 5:9), describing the way evil works.

Jesus confirms this way of thinking about yeast, when prophesying against the Pharisees. He said '*beware of the yeast of the Pharisees!*' (Matt 16:6,11, Luke 12:1), meaning that Pharisaism could have no part in the Kingdom of God. We should not forget that Jesus also gave a parable that is quite different from this. In Matthew 13:33f. and Luke 13:21f. He describes the Kingdom of God as growing like yeast; but it is fair to say that this is probably an example of Jesus' oft-used technique of turning what people thought upside down, in order to make them think about the Kingdom of God!

Here in our passage, Paul presumes that the reader knows all about a Passover meal, and the connection between yeast and evil, which had to be thrown away before participation in the traditional sacrificial meal. However, he probably means more than this. It is highly likely that in referring to '*Christ our Passover Lamb*' (5:7), he was not just talking about the death of Christ, but about the meal used to celebrate that sacrifice; that is, the 'Lord's Supper'. Remember of course that this meal was itself modelled on the Passover.

So when Paul concluded, '*let us celebrate the festival ... with unleavened sincerity and truth*' (5:8), he was delivering no mere sentiment, but rather a practical instruction. As we will find out later on in 1 Corinthians (in chapter 11), the Corinthians were keen on their celebration of the Lord's Supper', but they had become the occasion of extravagance and indeed corruption. It seems that Paul therefore urged the Corinthians to approach this special meal not with evil, dishonesty and corruption, but with plain '*sincerity and truth*' (5:8).

Of course, the whole passage follows on closely from Paul's exposé of sexual immorality in the life of the church at Corinth. Such evil was like a cancer in the heart of the church, as Paul now points out, and his message now challenges those who perpetrated this evil to accept the truth of God's word about such things (see yesterday's passage) and rid the church of them. In His ministry, Jesus had spoken about the Kingdom of God growing in the midst of the world through His disciples and those who would come after them. Paul would have known this and stood horrified at the evils of sexual immorality that plagued the church. It is not surprising that Paul used the strongest possible language and the most poignant of all illustrations to challenge the Corinthians and point to Christ.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- More about the illustration (3:6f.)
- Re-claim what you are (3:7)
- The life of the church (3:8)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V6 'the reason for your boasting'

The word for 'boast' here means not just the action of boasting, but the object of that boast or the reason for it, hence my translation. However, it is important to be sure that we know exactly what Paul is referring to here. See study.

V7 'you are without yeast because Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed'

There are a couple of things here. Firstly, you will find that some translations begin a new sentence after 'yeast', giving 'For Christ our Passover sacrifice has been sacrificed. I have taken the two Greek conjunctions (joining words) connecting the phrases to mean that they belong together 'causally' (meaning that one is the reason for the other), and the reasons that the Corinthians have no yeast is because Christ has been sacrificed.

Secondly, the Greek word 'pascha' which is used here can mean simply the Passover festival itself. Here, however, it clearly refers to Christ symbolically as the animal sacrificed, normally a lamb but also possibly a goat. It is less confusing to refer to a 'lamb', hence my translation 'Passover Lamb'.

V8 'but with unleavened sincerity and truth.'

Nearly all translations have 'unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' even though the Greek does not have the word 'bread' here. They have added the word in order to help the sentence make sense. What difference does this make, however? Personally, I feel that by omitting the word 'bread' as Paul original does, this highlights the simplicity of the characteristics Paul identifies as worthy of the church of God; 'sincerity and truth'.

More about the illustration (3:6f.)

It does not do a church any good to shout too loud about any aspect of its life other than Christ, as Paul so obviously maintained. The purpose and function of the church has always been to show Christ to the world, so if it says too much about its policies for 'this or that', or its attitude towards 'the other', then this will only be helpful if it demonstrably helps people not just to know about God through Jesus, but to know God through Jesus. The Corinthian church wanted, like so many churches today, to be known as open and accepting. It wanted to appeal to the people of the world in all their immorality, and mistakenly claimed an ever greater liberality. Really, the true message of God was to call for people to make a choice between what was morally right and wrong, in the light of the crucifixion of God's son, Jesus Christ.

The illustration of the yeast in the dough was appealing to Paul because he did not want wrongful attitudes to spread through the whole church. As we read this passage, we may be tempted to think that the 'small amount of yeast' is the man who had married his step-mother, and that this evil would spread throughout the church if allowed to remain in the dough, as if this meant the church at Corinth. We must reject this interpretation for several reasons. Firstly, the issue for Paul here was not the man, he had already been dealt with (5:3-5); it was the church at Corinth which was boasting in its libertarianism. Secondly, Paul spoke about the 'whole batch' of dough, and the added Greek word for 'whole' (or 'all') is typical of Paul's writing about the universal church of God. As far as Paul was concerned, the whole of the Corinthian church was already affected by the yeast of libertarianism, and he did not want this evil spreading throughout the rest of the church!

The solution suggested by the illustration Paul chose was to purge the church of its wrongful attitudes, just as yeast was hunted out of the households of Jews before the Passover meal (5:7). It is interesting to note that Paul did not suggest a re-evaluation of the issues concerned (marriage laws), but rather a purge of all human attitudes appropriate for a church witnessing to Christ, 'our Passover Lamb'. It would be unwise to take the illustration any further than this, however, because the proverb was merely an illustration. Jesus Himself used it in the same way as Paul does here (see Matt 16:6), and elsewhere he used yeast as an example of the growth of the Kingdom of God, in at least one parable; 'the kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount ...' (Matt 13:33)!

Re-claim what you are (3:7)

The illustration collapses in verse 7 where Paul focuses on calling for the church to accept its true colours and become what it is supposed to be. The sequence of thought is a little strange as he moves from talking about the yeast to describing Christ as the Passover Lamb. Firstly, his request was for the church to 'clear out the yeast', which meant ditching those libertarian attitudes that allowed people to do whatever they wanted. Paul then said 'for really, you are without yeast because Christ ... has been sacrificed', and at this point, we are slightly confused. Either the yeast is present or it is not, and if they are really 'without yeast' (which is what Paul says), then why call for it to be cleared out!

The trouble is that Paul was not thinking here about the meaning of his illustration but about the purity of the church and the unique nature of Christ's sacrifice as the one 'Passover Lamb'. In other words, Paul was proclaiming the church in its pure state, and 'unleavened' by evil and wrongdoing. This was the true calling of the church at Corinth. However, Paul knew full well that the church had to be vigilant to protect its purity

and maintain its true nature as a witness to Christ. His call therefore was for the church to return to its purity and its primary call, and rid itself of 'yeast'. The challenge to 'become what you are supposed to be' is a typically Christian challenge, appropriate to us as individuals as well as the church. For God's people are 'saved by the grace of God' (Ep 2:5,8), but because we live as individuals in a sinful world, we must 'work out our salvation in fear and trembling' (Phil 2:12). The church, however, both 'is' the Kingdom of God here on earth (Matt 13:44f.), but because of the sinful nature of the world, must work hard to 'become' the true place of God's rule for those who enter it (Matt 22:2f.). In this world, nothing is automatic, and godly vigilance is always necessary.

The church, as Paul understood it, was defined by the work of Christ as the 'Passover Lamb' (5:7), or as he put it earlier, as 'Christ crucified' (1:23). In the festival of the Passover, the lamb was slaughtered for the Passover meal only after the leaven was searched out and destroyed. Paul wanted to see the church purified by the removal of human attitudes so that the reality of Christ's work would be the focus of the church's witness once more.

The life of the church (3:8)

The idea of the life of the church as 'festival' is highly attractive today, as many individual churches attempt to be more Christ-like and meaningful where they are placed throughout the world. It is surely helpful for God's people to be seen by the world as celebrating something that is wonderful and worth enjoying. Paul reminds us firmly that cannot escape the fact, however, that we celebrate a Saviour who was crucified for us and has nothing to do with the evils and wickedness of the world. The question that the Corinthians probably argued over was what indeed was evil and what was not. Moral issues could not be escaped, and they have always had a propensity to divide people. Was Paul's advice something that would only feed the divisions of the church and not help to heal them?

We can begin to find a way through this conundrum if we look carefully at what Paul said in this text. Paul spoke about celebrating, and firstly, this celebration is the everlasting celebration of the Easter story, or the 'Passover' story of Christ's death and resurrection. From the earliest of days, the church has made its main day of celebration and worship not the Sabbath day, but the day of Christ's resurrection, that is Sunday, the first day of the week. It might help us today to recognise the nature of what we do in worship if we could separate it from the idea of Sabbath, and also keep the Sabbath as God commands, as a day of rest. We have allowed the world to think that Christian worship links with the Sabbath, and it gleefully ridicules our attitudes towards the Sabbath because our Saviour made a mockery of Sabbath laws in His own day! No, Christian worship is fundamentally 'Passover', or 'Easter' celebration, and not 'Sabbath' celebration.

In addition, Paul said that our celebration should be noted for the absence of the world's evils and wickedness, and whilst we cannot avoid the necessity of discerning God's wisdom for this, the clue to our celebration must surely be in 'unleavened sincerity and truth'. This phrase of Paul's means sincerity and truth untainted by moral compromise. Sincerity is often mocked as a worthy sentiment, but to be sincere is to honestly attempt to do what is right with all integrity. Now, people can so often get things wrong even when they are sincere, hence the world's ability to mock sincerity. However, if we can see each other as God's people who are, all of us, sincerely attempting to do what is right before God, despite our difficulties and the moral conundrums, and if we together claim Christ our 'Passover', then why mock sincerity? What is wrong if we fail to agree on everything, except our faith in Christ, but agree that we are all searching for the truth? Is this not worthy, and does not open honesty count as worthy within the church?

Then lastly, unleavened truth is surely the touchstone of our celebration and worship, for our faith lies in the truths of our conviction and life experiences measured not individually but collectively, that our God is real, and we worship Him 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:23f.). The world shouts back at us 'what is truth', as Pilate did to Jesus so many years ago, not accepting that the man who stood before him was indeed all truth personified (John 18:38). Even in science, a scientist can only do what a Christian does, which is to work on the premise that something is true and test it out until the evidence proves it one way or the other. A scientist works in the realms of what is measurable physically, but the spirit can only measure the things of the spirit, and although millions of people taste Christ and find Him true, we cannot 'prove' this with scientific measurements. We can only ask others to try as we have done and help them or allow them to find God's 'truth' themselves.

There is no reason, despite current trends of scepticism in the world, not to accept what Paul says here as a profound challenge to us 'celebrate the festival' of Christ's love on the Cross in sincerity and truth.

Discipleship

Application

I have already discussed many issues of application within this study. However, the last one is challenging, because it is so hard to appeal to sincerity and the genuine quest for truth in a world that has become so profoundly sceptical at almost every turn. The word 'sincerity' has become so downgraded that it has virtually been replaced in the vocabulary of the Western world (in English) by the word 'empathy' and if someone says they 'empathise', then nods of approval follow; if someone says they 'sympathise', then this is regarded as casual and insincere! How our insecurities muddle our language! If someone claims to have found truth, this is either rejected out of hand, or it is minimised by everyone on the basis that all truth is relative to individuals (it's your truth, not mine'). Even in the church, you will find people who are sceptical of facts beyond what they can 'see for themselves', citing Thomas as a disciple and failing to accept that Jesus broke his doubts before he could receive the blessings of Jesus with the other disciples (John 20:24-29).

Our world needs challenging about its attitudes towards sincerity and truth, because sincerity is a basic human attitude and not to me mocked, and absolute truth can be found, whether in the scientific world or the world of human spiritual experience. It is unworthy for a sceptic of modern life to say a scientist has not found truth, if they refuse to accept that science and engineering have brought many benefits to humanity including themselves. Likewise, it is unworthy of a humanist to ridicule the Christian claim to have found truth, when he will not entertain the spiritual basis for the claim, or ridicules it.

What does this all have to do with the 'celebration of the festival', or Christian worship? Paul reminds us in this text that not only must we dispense with what we discern to be evil, we must harness the honest qualities of sincerity and truth that speak to the heart of all people. Christ did not die in some kind of spiritual vacuum that enables only certain people to perceive it, or people of certain cultures to accept it. His work was done publicly and openly so that God might be made known in the world and so that all might come to know His love. We still fight the evils of our day, but we should be proud to stand for what we sincerely believe to be the truth of God and His salvation through Jesus Christ.

Questions for groups

1. What does the illustration of the yeast and the dough tell us today, and how can we respond to its message?
2. To what extent is it helpful to think of Christ as our 'Passover Lamb'? How can the church reflect this in its worship?
3. How can we advocate our claim to have found the truth about God in today's sceptical world?

Discipleship challenges

- *What needs to be cleared out of the life of your own church as the yeast, or the 'dead wood' of evil, dissension or strife? How can this be done. Talk about this with others.*
- *How can you demonstrate true sincerity and a commitment to finding and living by truth? Pray about this and let the Lord guide you in this exploration.*

Final Prayer

Make me always ready, Great Lord of All, to love as I am loved, to serve as I am served, to give as I have received, and to help as I have been helped. Make me always ready to show through what I do the thanks I owe to You, my Lord, for saving me. AMEN
