
THE CHRISTIAN PROSPECT

VOL. I, NO. 5 – DECEMBER 6, 2021

A Word to Our Readers

We hope this issue of the Prospect finds you well and continue to pray for God's blessings on all of His people! This issue has been delayed by a few days so that we could do justice to the questions considered in "The Grace of God, Part 4" and "Good Teaching, Part 2." In a similar vein, our study in the book of Mark will be postponed until January. Time and circumstances did not allow us to finish our study of the passages under consideration.

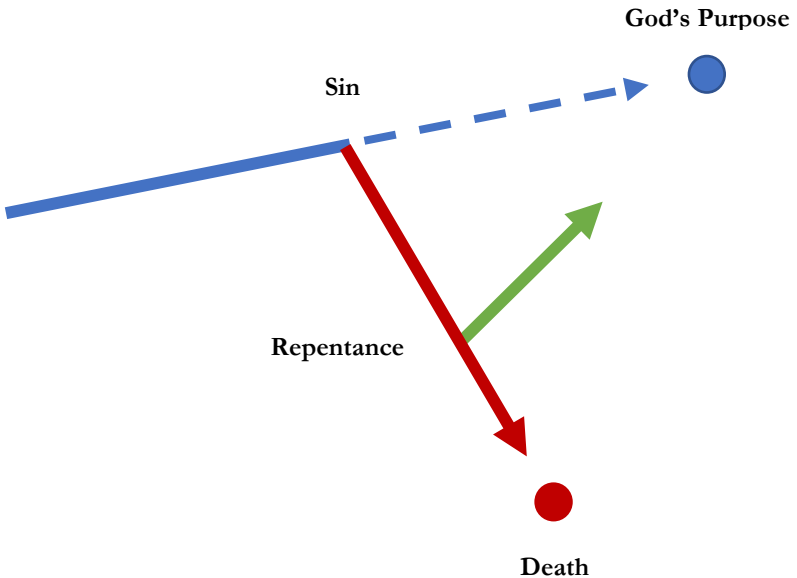
We are grateful for your patience with us and for your continued dedication to the word of God!

- M. S.

The Grace of God, Part 4

So far, we have seen that God has expressed His grace throughout history in line with His purpose for humanity. We have all defied God in some way or another, but He has expressed His desire to restore us to the role that He originally created us to fill. When Adam and Eve sinned, He gave them a plan to correct their misstep. This plan necessarily included grace since Adam and Eve and every person who has lived since then is guilty of sin. However, God has not simply poured out His grace indiscriminately on all who have sinned. He has hope that we will be restored, and we will be able to fill the role that He designed for us, but when we take that hope away from Him, He no longer feels obligated to extend any sort of grace toward us. This is what happened with the flood, when humanity became so disinterested in God that it was no longer possible for anyone raised in that culture to even hear God's name.

At this stage in our study, it will be helpful to draw a distinction between two kinds of grace – or, perhaps more accurately, the way that God’s grace interacts with two kinds of people. Consider the chart below:



This chart takes it for granted that every person’s life can be plotted as a trajectory. Whether we are conscious of the fact or not, every decision that we make in every department of our lives will either bring us closer to God or take us farther away from Him.

If we were to imagine a perfect human race that never sinned, their lives could be traced along the blue line. Their entire existence would consist of fulfilling God’s purpose in His creation. They would rule for eternity alongside Him. God enabled Adam and Eve to live this kind of existence, but He took eternity away from them (temporarily) when they sinned.

All of us find ourselves tracing the red line at some point in our lives. Any decisions we make that carry us away from God carry us toward death

(Romans 5:12). The society that existed before the flood had committed themselves so fully to this path that they forgot entirely that another path existed. God's grace toward those who are on this line is governed by His hope. He is patient and will not punish them immediately because He has hope that some will still repent and commit themselves to His purpose once again (2 Peter 3:9).

Those who have rededicated themselves to God's purpose find themselves tracing the green line, reaching toward that which we have lost through sin. God's grace is expressed toward these people to help them reach their goal. Christ's work is able to atone for our sins – thereby removing the legal matters that would prevent us from fulfilling our purpose – and He is able to help us overcome the obstacles in our path. Last of all, His grace will enable us to overcome death and live with Him eternally (Hebrews 2:14-18).

Thus, we can speak of two kinds of grace: hopeful grace – which does not save, but rather delays punishment to make an opportunity for repentance – and enabling grace – which makes up for our weakness when we commit ourselves to God, so that we are able to overcome sin and death and be united with Him once again. The way that God's grace is expressed toward us hinges, then, on our repentance. It is up to us to commit ourselves to God and to take the first steps toward Him. After that, it is His grace that enables us to complete the journey.

We can see this principle at work in the Old Testament. In Exodus 20, after God had given the ten commandments as a summary of the covenant He would make with the children of Israel, God made them a promise: "In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you" (Exodus 20:24, NKJV). In short, He promised that if they would come to Him, He would come to them. They could not reach into the heavens to find the throne of God, but as long as they were willing to make a journey that was within their reach to a place that the Lord would specify, God would make up the difference and meet them in the tabernacle as if they had come all the way to His throne.

David praised God's grace at length in the 103rd Psalm. He praised the fact that God sustains our lives, and He is patient with us even though our sins demand His judgment. He praised the fact that God appreciates our weaknesses and is willing to help us work through them:

*"He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our iniquities.
11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;
12 As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
13 As a father pities his children,
So the Lord pities those who fear Him.
14 For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we are dust."*

(Psalm 103:10-14, NKJV)

Further, David praised the fact that God's mercy will preserve His children eternally. All that He asks is that we use His grace to glorify Him and to fulfill His purpose in us. If we will do this, if we will keep His covenant, His grace toward us will know no bounds:

*"As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
16 For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more.
17 But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting
On those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,
18 To such as keep His covenant,
And to those who remember His commandments to do them."*

(Psalm 103:15-18, NKJV)

Right now, God is preserving the world out of hope that all will turn to Him. If we commit ourselves to His purpose, He will not allow anything in the universe to stand between us and Him. If He has confidence in us, we can have confidence in Him.

- M. S.

Call on the Name of the Lord, Part 3

In our previous studies we explored the development of Seth's family into the covenant people of God. This started after Cain's fall when Seth's descendants began to call on the name of the Lord. From this lineage, Abraham was called to be the father of a great nation. God's covenant with him promised a land inheritance and a family that would number as the stars in the heavens. This relationship between God and Abraham's family eventually grew into the nation of Israel under the leadership of Moses. They took possession of the land promised to Abraham and with it received a law that would guide their relationship with God and each other.

In our studies thus far, we have seen how men of old called on the name of the Lord. Fundamentally, this was part of man's relationship with God. The phrase is often used as an indicator of public worship, as Seth's family began to practice. Men built their altars for sacrifice and called on the name of the Lord. Men who followed God could rightly call on Him because He was with them. Through obedience they received His blessings.

The nation of Israel, as God's adopted people, were entitled to wear and use His name. He was their God; they were His people. Through this special relationship they received abundant blessings. Their nation was prosperous and defeated their enemies in battle. Their numbers grew. But all these things depended on their faithfulness to their covenant with God. The use of, and association with, the Lord's name is only for those who follow His commands.

In time, God's leadership became unfashionable among the Hebrew elders. They wanted a king like the nations around them. Samuel pleaded with

them, but they refused to hear his advice. They had rejected God as their king (1 Samuel 8:7). In the years that followed, every bad thing Samuel predicted came to pass, until finally the kingdom was split in two. Beginning with their first king Saul, Israel drew away from God and His law, leading eventually to the ruin of the nation and enslavement by foreign peoples. He was no longer their God, and they were no longer His people in the way God intended.

During this time, the prophets worked to reconcile the people to God. Judah had a few good kings who led the people back to God, but Israel never did. There were times of repentance but, overall, the people continued to drift away. Some of the prophets began to speak of a future time when God would send a Messiah to redeem His people and establish a new covenant with them. In this way the prophets had a dual message, one of immediate hope if they would repent and reestablish their relationship with God, another of hope for a greater kingdom through the Messiah.

Isaiah was a messenger of both present and future hope. He began his prophesy by condemning Judah and Jerusalem. Israel had already departed from God, and now the rest were leaving Him too. God condemned their rebellion and sin. He no longer wanted their offerings or incense. Their feasts and Sabbaths were worthless to Him. He did not hear their prayers. Their only remedy was repentance, a demonstration of willingness and obedience (Isaiah 1:19). There was still hope. Zion could be delivered while God punished those who forsook Him (Isaiah 1:27-28).

He also presented a hopeful message about the future. God continued to call Judah and Israel to repent, but also began to foreshadow salvation to come. This should not surprise us. The promise of salvation from sin began in the garden of Eden and was reiterated many times.

In chapter 2, Isaiah reveals the establishment of the Lord's house:

*“Now it shall come to pass in the latter days
That the mountain of the Lord's house*

*Shall be established on the top of the mountains,
 And shall be exalted above the hills;
 And all nations shall flow to it.
³ Many people shall come and say,
 "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
 To the house of the God of Jacob;
 He will teach us His ways,
 And we shall walk in His paths."
 For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
 And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
 And rebuke many people;
 They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
 And their spears into pruning hooks;
 Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
 Neither shall they learn war anymore."*

(Isaiah 2:2-4, NKJV)

This is commonly understood as a Messianic prophesy referring to the establishment of Christ's church. This would involve the teaching of God's word, the giving of His law, and a new relationship with God. We know looking back through history that the nation of Israel would never again reclaim its former glory. This did not mean God abandoned them completely. His grace was sufficient for their survival as a people and a nation, but autonomous rule with God as their King would never happen again. Instead, a remnant was preserved as a means of bringing the Messiah into the world to fulfill the many prophecies about Him (Galatians 3:24).

Joel writes in the same tone as Isaiah. We are not told when Joel wrote, but the circumstances were the same. The Hebrew people were living sinfully, so the Lord had withdrawn His grace. Locusts plagued the land and a looming army threatened. Israel was lost in sin. The devastation was so

bad that the ceremonial offerings were not being made (Joel 1:9). This was the common way by which the people maintained their relationship with God, no matter how strained it might otherwise be.

The solution God offered was repentance. “Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar” (Joel 1:13, NIV). Though the offerings were being withheld, the people were admonished to publicly appeal, or call out, to God:

*“Declare a holy fast;
call a sacred assembly.
Summon the elders
and all who live in the land
to the house of the Lord your God,
and cry out to the Lord.”*

Joel 1:14 (NIV)

This was their present hope. If they would show true repentance and call on God they could be restored. The first chapter concludes with Joel’s own appeal to God for mercy:

*“To you, Lord, I call,
for fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness
and flames have burned up all the trees of the field.
²⁰ Even the wild animals pant for you;
the streams of water have dried up
and fire has devoured the pastures in the wilderness.”*

Joel 1:19-20 (NIV)

The second chapter opens with a threat of judgment and appeal for repentance. “Even now,” the Lord says, “return to me with all your heart” (Joel 2:12, NIV). Again, Joel admonishes the people to publicly assemble and call on God for mercy (vv. 15-17).

Because of their unfaithfulness, the Hebrew’s relationship with God was strained. They could not call on the name of the Lord as they had in the past. According to Isaiah, God did not want their sacrifices, He did not hear their prayers, their worship to Him was worthless (Isaiah 1:10-15). What a terrible situation! Instead, they were commanded to call out to Him in mourning and repentance. This is all God wanted to hear from them, anything else was unacceptable. This serves as a warning to all of us. God will not accept the worship of the unrighteous.

In spite of their wickedness, God offered hope. If they would turn to Him, He would restore their land and bless them. Joel’s message develops into a reaffirmation of God’s hope and love for His people. There could be abundant blessings, freedom from enslavement, and a restoration of God’s presence among them (vv. 19-27).

This came about following the Hebrews’ return from Persian captivity. In Jeremiah 29 the prophet wrote a letter of encouragement to those who had already been carried away into captivity. It was designed to prepare them for their eventual return. God reiterated His promise to bring them back from captivity (v. 10) and said, “Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you” (v. 12, NKJV). Much of this section is Messianic in nature, but the promise to restore their present relationship was real. This preserved remnant would again be allowed to call on God and be heard.

After their return to Jerusalem, they were allowed to rebuild the city walls and the temple and enjoyed some independence. Israel in the first century was ruled by Rome, but loosely, and they enjoyed a measure of prosperity.

Joel also wrote concerning the future Messianic kingdom. The second chapter ends with a message of hope for future salvation.

*“And it shall come to pass afterward
That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
Your young men shall see visions.*

*²⁹ And also on My menservants and on My maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days.*

*³⁰ “And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth:
Blood and fire and pillars of smoke.*

*³¹ The sun shall be turned into darkness,
And the moon into blood,*

Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.

*³² And it shall come to pass
That whoever calls on the name of the Lord
Shall be saved.*

*For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance,
As the Lord has said,
Among the remnant whom the Lord calls.”*

(Joel 2:28-32, NKJV)

The Apostle Peter told us this was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost following the crucifixion. Joel’s prophecy was consistent with Isaiah’s. Both were sent to a sinful, rebellious people to lead them back to God. Both offered repentance as the solution to their present condition. Joel is more specific in his admonition to publicly gather and mourn, calling out to God for mercy.

Zechariah prophesied following the return from Persian captivity. This was in many respects the return to a better relationship with God that had been sought by the earlier prophets. Zechariah reminded them how God had been angry with their ancestors, and that God offers peace. “Return to Me,” says the Lord of hosts, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the Lord of

hosts” (1:3, NKJV). God’s desire was always to be their God and have them as His people. Through Zechariah, God said, “I am returning to Jerusalem with mercy; My house shall be built in it” (1:16, NKJV), and that “Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people” (2:11, NIV), echoing language found in Isaiah 2. Zechariah foretold the events following Christ’s crucifixion.

Zechariah 12:10-11 (NKJV): *“And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. ¹¹ In that day there shall be a great mourning in Jerusalem.”*

Zechariah 13:1 (NIV): *“On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.”*

Zechariah 13:9 (NKJV): *“I will bring the one-third through the fire, Will refine them as silver is refined, And test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, And I will answer them. I will say, ‘This is My people’; And each one will say, ‘The Lord is my God.’”*

Here was the continued prophetic message of hope. The Messiah would bring salvation to a lost world, cleansing many of their sin. Those who call on the name of the Lord will be His people, and He will be their God.

Jeremiah, like Isaiah, spoke out against Judah and Jerusalem for their sinfulness, announcing the impending overthrow of the city by the Babylonians. His words complement those of Isaiah and Joel as they relate to God’s future relationship with His people.

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—³² not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be

their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴ *No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more"* (Jeremiah 31:31-34, NKJV).

Jeremiah specifically promises both a new covenant and the forgiveness of sin.

What we learn from these four prophets and the benefit of hindsight is that God was always going to have a people of His own. Through the Messiah, a new kingdom, the church, would be established, but not with geographic or ethnic boundaries. It would be a spiritual kingdom, revealed with great signs from heaven. From it, the gospel would be taught so that people could know "His ways" and "walk in His paths." These would be made up of all nations, signaling the inclusion of the Gentiles. To be in this kingdom you must "know the Lord" and have the law in your mind and written on your heart. In other words, you must learn and decide for yourself to obey. In this way it is not like the covenant with the Hebrews, who were born into the law and broke it. The new covenant is for people who willingly choose to be God's people. Once taught the gospel, everyone is able to call on the name of the Lord and be saved. God will forgive your wickedness and remember your sins no more, so that you can rightly say "The Lord is my God."

Other prophets followed the same pattern in their work. Zephaniah referred to a future time when godly people would again call on the name of the Lord (Zephaniah 3:9-12). Through Jonah, God gave the people of Nineveh the opportunity to repent. In response the king declared a fast (3:7) and commanded repentance (3:8). He also said, "Let everyone call urgently on God" (3:8, NIV). Like the rebellious Hebrews, the only access the people of Nineveh had to God was to call on Him in mourning and repentance. This demonstrates God's intention to include the Gentiles in the coming kingdom.

Throughout Scripture, the redemptive plan which began in the garden is revealed. God does not forget His promises. The prophets worked to help people maintain or reestablish their relationship with God, while also revealing a future when the Messiah would establish His kingdom. In those last days salvation would be offered to all mankind, and those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. In our next essay we will study the conclusion of God's redemptive plan as it is revealed to us in the New Testament.

- **Lance Stallcop**

Bible Interpretation, No. 5

Introduction

In the last study, we discussed four types of questions that we should ask when we study a biblical text. These questions will provide a structure for the remainder of our course. Until now, we have been learning how to prepare our minds to interpret a text – we have dealt with our expectations when we approach the Bible and the logical principles we should follow when we interpret a text. We have dealt with the linguistic gap that separates us from the original text and how to work around that using multiple translations. We have learned to look at a specific text and identify what we need to know before we can say that we really understand that passage. Now, we will begin to answer the questions that we have developed.

The four categories of questions should, in general, be answered in order. We must know 1) what a verse says before we can explain 2) how it fits in its context. Once we understand the passage's role in the surrounding chapter and book, we can think about 3) why the author says it and what he intends to prove and, finally, 4) what impact the passage has on our understanding of the Bible as a whole. Therefore, we will begin with the foundational questions – how do we know what the words and phrases in a given text mean?

The Role of Dictionaries and Lexicons

When we are confronted with a word we do not know, whether in English or in one of the biblical languages, our first impulse will probably be to look in a dictionary. This is a good place to start, but what is the proper way to use a dictionary? Most dictionary entries include several possible definitions; how do we pick the correct one out of the list?

As an example, let us consider the word “baptism,” (more precisely, the Greek word *βάπτισμα*) in 1 Peter 3:21. A dictionary definition will look something like the following¹:

βάπτισμα, ατος, τὸ

1. The ceremonious use of water for purpose of renewing or establishing a relationship w. God, *plunging, dipping, washing, water-rite, baptism.*
 - a. Of John's rite
 - b. Of Christian rite
2. An extraordinary experience akin to an initiatory purification rite, *a plunge, a baptism*
 - a. Metaph. Of martyrdom
 - b. Metaph. Of salvation

At first glance, this gives us four possible meanings for the word “baptism” in this verse: 1) John's baptism, 2) Christian baptism, 3) martyrdom, or 4) salvation in an abstract sense. Depending on the specific dictionary we use,

¹This definition is a simplified version (without references or several explanatory notes) of what appears in Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 165. Logos.

we may find a little extra guidance if the verse we are interpreting is given as a reference for one or more definitions, though it is important to remember that these references are the interpretation of the dictionary's author. Ultimately, it falls to us as interpreters to decide which of these possible meanings applies in our specific verse.

What role does a dictionary play, then, if it does not give us everything we need to complete a word study? Dictionary and lexicon entries are designed to encompass a whole body of literature and use – a dictionary of biblical Greek usually encompasses the New Testament, perhaps the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and the earliest Christian writings. They are meant to explain every possible meaning the word carries in any of its uses throughout that literature. The entry itself is no more specific than the range of research used to produce it.

This means that we should treat a lexicon entry more as a limiter than a precise instrument. A well-researched lexicon will tell us everything that the word can mean – it would be unwise for us to adopt an interpretation that cannot be found in any dictionary – but we must use more specific tools if we wish to understand how the word is being used in a particular passage. Thankfully, the passage itself gives us what we need.

The Role of Context

The dictionary definition for “baptism” has given us a range of possible meanings. These meanings fit first into two overarching categories – literal meanings and metaphorical meanings – each of which is subdivided into two different kinds of literal baptism and metaphorical baptisms. To narrow these options down and determine which meaning fits best in 1 Peter 3:21, we need to look at the context.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. ²¹ There is also an antitype

which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.

4 *Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. (1 Peter 3:18-4:1, NKJV)*

First, we need to decide whether the baptism Peter mentions here is literal or metaphorical. We should look for anything in the context that supports one interpretation over the other. We might notice the following points in favor of a literal meaning:

- Peter draws a connection between baptism and the flood, which is centered around the phrase “saved through water” (v. 20).
- Peter seems to think that baptism could be misunderstood as a physical washing, which is why he explains that its power is “not the removal of the filth of the flesh” (v. 21) but that it represents something deeper.

It would also be possible for someone to make the following argument to support a metaphorical meaning:

- Peter’s overall point in this passage is to encourage Christians to endure suffering in this life, like the suffering that Christ endured (4:1). He may, therefore, be talking about martyrdom as a metaphorical “baptism” that saves us.

While there is nothing intrinsically wrong about this argument, it does ignore the close connections Peter draws between baptism and water, as well as washing, especially since the literal interpretation of baptism still contributes to Peter’s overall point about Christian suffering – specifically, the power of literal baptism comes from Christ’s suffering, who was then glorified through the resurrection. Therefore, we should expect to see the

same kind of glorification after our own sufferings and death, since we have pledged our hope in that very truth through our literal baptism.

So we can conclude that Peter is speaking of literal baptism in this passage, not a metaphorical experience. We can use the same context to refine our interpretation as to the *kind* of literal baptism being discussed. Our dictionary entry allowed the same word to refer to both John's baptism and Christian baptism. The fact that Peter identifies Christ's resurrection as the power of baptism tells us that we are considering Christian baptism here, not John's baptism.

Figurative Language

Figurative language – including words and phrases that are used metaphorically – can be found in every part of the Bible. For example, Jesus used two figurative phrases in Matthew 20:22 (NKJV):

But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

In the context of Jesus' conversation in Matthew 20, it does not make sense to understand either "drink the cup that I am about to drink" or "be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with" according to their literal meanings. He had just explained to His disciples that he needed to suffer torture and crucifixion (vv. 17-19). Immediately afterward, the sons of Zebedee and their mother came to Jesus to ask whether He would give the two men authority on His right hand and on His left (vv. 20-21). Considering that Jesus' words in verse 22 are meant to be a reply to this request, it is best to understand the "cup" and the "baptism" in this verse as figurative references to Jesus' suffering and death. He is asking, in plain language, "can you endure the suffering that I have just described to you?"

Just as we saw above in 1 Peter 3:21, the context is able to guide us when we are dealing with figurative language as well. When we look at a word or a phrase in isolation, it may be impossible to tell exactly what the author

means to convey, since every word and phrase has a range of meaning. We must allow the flow of the argument or the narrative to tell us what we should expect when we come across such turns of phrase.

However, figurative language is more prominent in some parts and genres of the Bible than others. When we study the poetic books of the Old Testament (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon), as well as several passages in the major and minor prophets, we should expect to see more metaphors and more figures of speech. In these passages, we need to pay closer attention to the context so that we understand the meaning intended by the original author. Consider Isaiah 51:1-2 (NKJV):

*Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness,
You who seek the Lord:
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug.
 ² Look to Abraham your father,
 And to Sarah who bore you;
 For I called him alone,
 And blessed him and increased him."*

In this passage, Isaiah gives explicit directions to those who wish to be righteous and seek the Lord, "look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which you were dug." These commands do not make any sense when we give them their literal meaning – God's people were neither literally hewn from a rock, nor were they dug out of the ground. Thus, it is necessary to understand them figuratively. The context helps us, because Isaiah goes on to explain that the Israelites needed to look back to Abraham and Sarah, their common ancestors. Why? Because Abraham and Sarah's character exemplified what God values in humanity and demonstrated true righteousness. It was because of Abraham's righteousness that God established the nation of Israel, and so it was necessary for Isaiah's contemporaries to look back to him to understand

what pleases the Lord. Abraham and Sarah were the rock from which Israel had been hewn, and the earth from which they had been dug.

Thus, genre does not determine how we understand figurative language – we must understand how a figure of speech fits into its context in any case – but we should expect to find more figurative language more often in poetic writings than in prose. Not every phrase in the Bible is meant to be understood literally, but every phrase does have an intended meaning that can be understood.

Conclusion

It is necessary to use both tools – dictionaries and context – to complete a word study. Each of these tools will help to guide our study and to protect us from reading our own opinions into the text. Dictionaries and lexicons construct a fence that will prevent us from assigning a fantastical or unlikely meaning to a word, while a careful consideration of the context of the passage will protect us from simply selecting the definition that we like best. Using these tools together will allow the text to guide us and our thoughts.

- M. S.

A New Translation of 1 Corinthians 5

“It is well known that there is sexual immorality among you, and such immorality as cannot even be found among the Gentiles – such that a man has his father’s wife! And are you proud, when you should rather be grieving to the point that the one who has done this thing should be taken away from you? For I, though I am absent in body, but present in spirit, have already determined what should happen with the one who has done this as though I were present: that you – when you are assembled together in the name of our Lord Jesus along with my spirit and with the power of the Lord Jesus – should hand one such as this over to Satan so that his flesh will be destroyed, this way his spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord.

It is not good that you boast. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Cleanse yourself of the old leaven so that you might be a new lump of dough,

even as you are unleavened. For Christ was also sacrificed as our Passover lamb. Therefore, let us not make our feast out of the old leaven or the leaven of depravity and wickedness, but rather let us eat the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with those who were sexually immoral, but this certainly does not mean the immoral people of the world, or those who are greedy and extortioners, or idolators, since then you would be obligated to withdraw from the world entirely. But, in reality, I have written to you that you should not associate with anyone who, while called a brother, is immoral, or greedy, or an idolator, or is abusive toward others, or is a drunkard, or an extortioner. Do not even eat with such a person! For why would it fall to me to judge those who are outside? Do you not judge those who are within your number? God, however, will judge those who are outside. 'Remove the evil one from among you.'"

Notes on the Translation

1: *"It is well known..."* – Most translations translate this phrase as something like "it is actually reported..." (NASB 1995, NKJV, ESV, NIV, NRSV). In these translations, the word "actually" communicates the Greek word ὁλως (ho-los), which can indicate either a wide scale – *completely, wholly, everywhere* – or the reality of an incredible fact – *actually, in fact*². Either interpretation is possible here, but I think it is more likely that Paul is indicating that the news of this man's sin had spread far and wide, so that he knew about it before they ever wrote to him. This would make it a contrast to Paul's introduction to the topic of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:1 (NKJV): "Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me..." Perhaps they had not written about this man's immorality, but Paul knew from the widespread report.

3-5: *"[I] have already determined... [you] should hand one such as this over to Satan..."* – These three verses are a single, complex sentence in Greek,

² 8 Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 704. Logos.

which is very difficult to translate literally into English. The main clause – or central thought – of the sentence is as follows:

- *“I have already determined that you should hand the one who has done this thing over to Satan.”*

The rest of the sentence describes either the situation in which Paul made the determination or how the Corinthians should follow through with his determination.

- *“I am absent in body but present in spirit, [so I made this determination] as if I were present with you.”*
- *“[You should hand him over to Satan] when you are assembled together in the name of our Lord Jesus; and my spirit and the power of the Lord Jesus will be with you [when you execute this judgment].”*

Most translations find it easiest to split the sentence into two, as with the NKJV, *“For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan,”* though some make an effort to connect the two, as the NASB 1995 in verse 5: *“I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan,”* and the NRSV: *“You are to hand this man over to Satan.”*

I have tried to preserve the unity of the sentence while still making good sense in English, since a strictly literal translation will tend to be more confusing than clarifying in this case.

8: *“Let us not make our feast out of... but rather let us eat...”* – This phrase is usually translated a little more passively, as in the NASB 1995: *“Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with... but with...”* I have translated it a little more actively to emphasize the responsibility that Paul is placing on the Corinthians. The Christian life is like a Passover feast, and Christ has provided Himself as the lamb. However, the Passover was always eaten with unleavened bread (cf. Deuteronomy 16:1-8), so the lamb was not the

only significant element. Paul tells the Corinthians that they are, in effect, the bread that filled out the feast alongside Christ, the lamb. It was improper for them to bring leavened bread to the Passover feast, so they needed to ensure that they, as a congregation, were unleavened – that there was no corrupting sin among their members. Thus, they were not just keeping the feast, but they were providing a part of it by how they conducted themselves as a congregation.

- M. S.

Out of the World

Comments on 1 Corinthians 5

Introduction

Once Paul had established the fundamental principles of Christian unity and of truth and service to God, he turned his attention to the specific problems that were plaguing the Corinthian congregation. Some members of the congregation had sent him a letter describing the divisions in their number (1 Corinthians 1:11), and Paul did address the concerns that letter revealed to him (1 Corinthians 7:1), but this chapter addresses a more pressing situation – one that threatened not only to cause a division in the church but also to lead to the total moral corruption of the whole group. Because of this dire state of affairs, Paul used sharp, though not unkind language to address the Corinthians. They needed to act, and soon.

1-5

First, Paul reveals that he did not learn about this situation from the Corinthians themselves. Whether they neglected to mention it in their letter, or if the news had traveled such that Paul had already heard about it before their letter reached him, we cannot say. However, it is clear that the news had spread far and wide, and yet the congregation had done nothing to correct the situation. As a result, everyone was generally appalled at them.

The problem itself was very plain – a man, a brother in the church, was committing sexual immorality with his father's wife. The language Paul used suggests that this was his stepmother, not his biological mother, but that fact does not lessen the severity of their sin. Paul did not go into detail about the situation, instead he appealed to the fact that their choices were so unambiguously wrong that even the most corrupt human societies who had no knowledge of God would condemn them. No one had to ask if the relationship was wrong, and Paul did not need to explain. Everyone already knew.

However, the Corinthian Christians did not react the way one would expect them to in this case. We might expect them to be shocked and horrified when the sin was brought to light – that they would have displayed some kind of revulsion. This sort of a reaction would necessarily have led to a separation between the one who was sinning and those who were trying to lead holy and righteous lives. But this was not how they reacted. Instead, they maintained a level of pride – perhaps they thought that this brother's actions did not reflect on the rest of the congregation, or they felt that his actions would not influence them one way or another. They did not react, they simply kept on about their lives as if nothing had ever happened.

For this reason, Paul rebuked them. He, even though he had not been to Corinth since this sin came to light, could see clearly what had to happen. The congregation needed to come together in an official capacity – the phrase, “when you are assembled together in the name of our Lord Jesus,” seems to refer to what Jesus taught in Matthew 18:15-20. There, Jesus explained to His apostles how to execute discipline as His servants. The process involved four steps:

1. One Christian, who has observed another sinning, should discuss it with the other privately. Ideally, the two will agree, the one at fault will correct his behavior, and all will be well between them.
2. If the one at fault will not discuss it or correct his behavior, then two or three should confront him together. This way, if he will

not hear them together, they can act as witnesses in front of the whole congregation.

3. When the whole congregation has come together, the two or three witnesses should tell them what has happened, and the congregation will pronounce their judgment against the one at fault.
4. If he will not hear even the whole congregation, it becomes their responsibility to put him out of the assembly and to have no more association with him unless and until he has corrected his course.

In Matthew 18:20, when He explained this process, Jesus promised that “where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (NKJV). I understand this to mean that, when the witnesses come together to present the matter to the whole assembly, Christ is there with them in His authority. In other words, the congregation is not passing judgment based on their own thoughts and abilities, but rather they are acting *with* and *for* Christ. This was meant to reassure the apostles, that they would have help and support from above when they had to undertake the difficult task of discipline.

It seems that Paul’s words were meant to reassure the Corinthians the same way in our passage. He told them to hand the sinning brother over to Satan “when you are assembled together in the name of our Lord Jesus, *along with my spirit and with the power of the Lord Jesus.*” They could be confident when they executed judgment against him because Paul’s judgment – which he was able to make even though he was not present – and Christ’s power stood with them. All they needed to do in this case was to agree with Paul and Christ, and to carry out the sentence.

It was necessary that this brother be handed over to Satan – that is, put out of the assembly and the association of the congregation – “so that his flesh will be destroyed.” This is to say that he needed to suffer. This was not a spiteful or sadistic punishment, but one that was calculated to help him realize that his body would be broken and that a life of pleasure would gain

him nothing. Paul hoped that he would realize in time that he needed to save his spirit.

6-8

In these verses, Paul presented the Passover to the Corinthians as a symbolic representation of their life together as a congregation to explain why discipline was so important. The Passover was a feast that the Israelites observed to remember how God saved them when they were slaves in Egypt. Paul drew out two culinary elements of the feast (which are described in full in Exodus 12:1-20 and Deuteronomy 16:1-8):

1. The Passover lamb, whose blood marked the Israelites and protected them from the Lord's judgment against the Egyptians.
2. Unleavened bread, which represented affliction (Deuteronomy 16:3), in that it reminded the Israelites of their escape from Egyptian captivity.

Paul represented the Christian life as a parallel to this feast, which demonstrates the active role that we have to take in our own salvation. Christ provided the lamb when He sacrificed Himself, but this is only one part of the feast. We, in our congregations, provide the bread. When we read of the Passover, it is plain that only one kind of bread was acceptable – unleavened – and it was wrong for the Israelites to allow any leavening or yeast to even come near their houses, so that it was impossible for their unleavened bread to become leavened. They had to be deliberate and careful that their feast was pure and uncorrupted.

Paul explained the concept through the symbolism of the Passover, but he did not leave any of his symbols unexplained. The Corinthians needed to be sure that they separated all depravity and wickedness from their bread – which was their congregation – and make sure that sincerity and truth were all that remained. This required a process of cleansing, and this was why discipline was so important in the case of this man who was sinning with his mother-in-law. If he were to remain in the congregation, his moral

depravity would have an impact on the rest of them. It is impossible to avoid this kind of corruption entirely unless we remove ourselves from it completely. This involves cleansing ourselves and our lives of wickedness (see, for example, James 1:21-25), as well as exercising discipline against those who will not give up their wicked ways.

This perspective demands that we think about our spiritual lives in the context of our local congregation. Our spiritual wellbeing is not just a matter to be determined between us and God alone – it is rather closely bound to our relationship with our fellow Christians. Paul has urged the Corinthians throughout the letter to adopt a common purpose in Christ so that they can grow together and support one another. When the church comes together, it is meant to be a productive time working together on our common goal. With this view, what are we to do with someone who is called a brother, but whose actions and decisions are actually counterproductive to our common goal? It was necessary for the Corinthians to exclude the sinning brother from their number – to the point that they should not even share a meal with him (v. 11) – so that his depravity could not discourage those who remained, nor could his choices do any sort of harm to the congregation's progress toward its goals.

9-10

It is difficult to say which letter Paul meant in this passage. He may have written an earlier letter that has not been preserved as part of the New Testament – this would not be problematic for the inspiration of the New Testament. We do not need to have every word that Paul ever wrote to have faith that the Holy Spirit has preserved what we need for our spiritual lives today. However, it is also possible that Paul is referring to what he wrote earlier in this chapter, though his wording is a little bit unusual. In either case, this phrase acts as a transition – we have seen that it is important for the congregation to separate itself from willful sinners, but how far does this obligation go? Is it important for us to remove ourselves from everyone who is guilty of any kind of sin? Is this the only way to keep our purity in view of Christ's sacrifice?

The answer is no, Paul did not intend to limit the Corinthians' ability to interact with those around them. Practically, the Corinthians probably were not prepared to take on a self-sufficient lifestyle. They needed food and clothing; they needed access to jobs and markets so that they could provide for themselves and sell what they produced. In the modern era, we might not have access to water or power if we had to cut ourselves off from anyone who was not a Christian. It could not easily be done, and it would be counterproductive toward our evangelistic interests. How could we teach our friends, families, and neighbors about Christ if we could not have any sort of social contact with them? How could we shine as lights in the world if we kept our distance? Our actions and decisions will set us apart from those around us, but our responsibilities toward sinners in our congregation is different from our responsibilities toward those who are outside.

11-13

The patience or hope that we would show to those who are outside our congregation cannot be applied to a brother or sister in Christ who refuses to leave the things of the world behind. As we have seen, we have a common responsibility to work productively toward our common goal as the people of God – we must become that new, unleavened lump. We cannot both belong to Christ and still live as if nothing has changed. We have committed ourselves to a path that will carry us closer to God with every step, and nothing in our lives can remain untouched. This is especially true for the things that are so openly opposed to the system of morality that God has ordained for us from the beginning that even those who are not Christians know that they are wrong. Consider the sins that Paul mentioned in this passage:

1. Immorality – Sexuality can be a good thing that glorifies God, when expressed properly (Ephesians 5:22-33). However, when it is abused, sexuality can be a disturbing and destructive force. When someone who is called a Christian gives control of his body

over to such a damaging influence, he makes it clear that God is not the controlling factor in his life.

2. Greed – This word implies someone who is addicted to gain – whether material possessions, wealth, or power. This person is led by the hope of aggrandizement, not the Spirit of God.
3. Idolatry – How can someone claim to be faithful to God while worshipping other deities? Anyone who commits to another religious belief makes it clear that he does not have faith in God.
4. Abuse toward others – People who are abusive toward others – specifically verbally – likely find their self-worth in their ability to feel superior to others. This conceit leads them to tear others down, rather than to encourage growth and spiritual development in the congregation.
5. Drunkenness – A Christian in our number who is fighting to overcome an addiction to alcohol or some other intoxicant needs our help and support, but one who willingly and freely gives himself over to an intoxicant is denying God the opportunity to lead his life.
6. Extortion – An extortioner is much like someone led by greed. The difference is that an extortioner hopes not only to gain something but to injure someone else in the process. These people have no love for their fellow man, and so they certainly cannot help to build them up and protect them as they grow together in Christ.

It appears that Paul was not encouraging the Corinthians to cast out everyone who had ever sinned, but rather he focused on the influences that could pull God's children away from Him. Congregational discipline is designed to keep the group focused, healthy, and productive in view of their common goals. It is not a pleasant thing to exercise judgment and discipline against a brother or a sister, but it is necessary when we think about the

congregation as a body that is moving on a trajectory. This will also send a clear message to the one who is being excluded. Our purpose as Christians matters, and we cannot allow anything to halt our progress in that direction.

But this is as far as our responsibility goes. God has given Christians neither the right nor the power to judge and discipline the world. He will take care of that. However, He has entrusted the leaders of every congregation with the right *and* the responsibility to maintain a positive and productive culture in their assemblies. We will not be held guiltless if we neglect to care for those God has entrusted to our care.

- M. S.

Good Teaching, Part 2

Introduction

Our first essay on this subject addressed one kind of relationship where doctrinal disagreements might occur. Our study followed a course shaped by four passages in 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. Each of these books was originally written as a letter of encouragement and instruction for a young evangelist who had been sent to guide the development of immature congregations (see, for example, 1 Timothy 1:3-4; Titus 1:5). In these cases, Paul encourages Titus and Timothy to conduct themselves in a manner that reflected their maturity and was calculated to develop a godly character in those who lacked it. They could act under the assumption that they were correct and those on the other side of any disagreement needed to grow. In their situation, this is an appropriate attitude to take, but this is not the only kind of relationship that we will find in our Christian lives.

Relative Maturity

Broadly speaking, we can imagine that every person we meet will fit into one of three categories, as far as relative spiritual maturity is concerned:

1. Some that we meet will be less mature than us.

2. Some that we meet will be about the same level of maturity as we are.
3. Some that we meet will be more mature than us.

In the first case, our responsibility is precisely what we discussed in our first essay. We will find ourselves in a position of authority, and we will be held accountable for how we use that authority. This will be where the principles of good teaching apply most fully – it must be (1) biblically based, (2) purposeful, (3) considerate, (4) sincere, and (5) inviting³. We will set the tone for this kind of relationship, and we must make sure that it encourages spiritual growth.

In the second case, our relationship should resemble our status as co-workers in our spiritual lives. In this case, it would be best to take cues from Paul's discussion of conceit, humility, and a common purpose in the wisdom and strength of Christ in 1 Corinthians 1-4. We should show enough conviction to express our questions and concerns, but enough humility not to assume that we cannot learn from our peers. Every question and disagreement in this relationship is one that should be tackled together. It is not a matter of one faction against another, but one of Christians working together to learn and to grow.

In the last case, our primary responsibility is to show humility. We must be willing to submit ourselves to the experience and wisdom of those who have progressed farther than we have in spiritual maturity. They hold the greater responsibility in our relationship, so we ought to show them due respect. We must be prepared to learn, even when we currently disagree with what they are teaching. Any concerns that we have with their teaching should be expressed with respect, preferably, I would think, as a question. They are mature, not infallible, but they are more mature than we are.

³ I have taken some liberty in simplifying the principles from the first part of this essay in the interest of brevity.

Paul describes all three of these relationships briefly in 1 Thessalonians 5:11-15 (NKJV):

"Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.

¹² And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.

¹⁴ Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. ¹⁵ See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all."

All of these instructions were given to the same group of readers. At the same time, they were to be considerate of their peers, comforting and edifying *one another*. Likewise, they were responsible for recognizing those *who labored among them, and were over them*, so that they paid proper respect toward their elders and toward the evangelists and teachers who guided their growth. Finally, they had a responsibility to look out for those who were *unruly, fainthearted, and weak*. They were in a position to help those who were younger or weaker than them in the faith, and Paul expected them to handle themselves accordingly.

With these principles established, there are two questions that remain in my mind: First, how can we identify who is more mature than us, and how can we identify who is a peer? Second, how can we generate a productive culture that will allow peers to work out their differences without a division⁴?

The first question is one that we can begin to answer immediately. The second one must wait until the next essay in our series. It is, by nature, a

⁴ We might also ask about the possibility of corruption in the leadership – a situation where those who legitimately hold authority decide to betray their principles and teach something that is not right – since this situation might set someone who is ostensibly less mature against those who are more mature. However, I believe that this question goes beyond the scope of the present series and is therefore best addressed elsewhere.

question that can only be answered by a group – no individual can develop a culture without the cooperation of the others who are concerned. For this reason, I am pursuing a dialogue with several of my peers and my mentors, and I invite any input that our readers have to share.

Toward Identifying Faithful Teachers

The book of 1 Corinthians has a heavy focus on doctrinal matters, which Paul balanced in 2 Corinthians by explaining and developing his relationship with the church at Corinth and better preparing their attitudes for future growth. In this process, he addressed the question of why the Corinthians should pay attention to what he had to say. Who was *Paul* to tell them the solutions to their arguments?

Paul made an appeal to his sincerity (2 Corinthians 2:17) – he was trustworthy because he was not one who would misuse his authority or the word of God for personal gain. How could the Corinthian Christians know that Paul was sincere? Simply put, through experience with him. Consider what Paul wrote at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 3:

“Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? ² You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; ³ clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.

⁴ And we have such trust through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Corinthians 3:1-6, NKJV)

Let us break down Paul’s case piece-by-piece:

- Paul and his preaching companions did not need a letter of commendation to prove their sincerity because the congregation in Corinth provided proof enough of their sincerity.

- This proof could be seen in the Corinthians because they showed signs of Christ's own work, not because they matched an immediate standard like the Law of Moses (tablets of stone), but because their own hearts (tablets of flesh) had been changed by the Spirit of God *through* Paul's ministry.
- When Paul undertook the work, he did not rely on his own abilities or his own authority but relied completely on God.
- He was not a minister who pronounced judgment based on an impersonal standard (the letter), but instead he labored to imprint the image of God's Spirit on the hearts of those who knew him (see also v. 18 for the progressive nature of the believers' transformation into God's image).

In other words, the Corinthians could see that Paul was a sincere minister of God because his work had made a real change in their hearts. Many of them were Christians in the first place because of Paul, and the rest had grown to be more like God thanks to his influence. Their experience had taught them that the doctrine which Paul taught would only benefit them and would not detract from their present understanding and maturity. Based on this experience, they knew that they could trust his input.

What does this mean for us today? It certainly implies that we must recognize those who are more mature than us based on experience. Paul rejected the idea that there was an immediate test that could allow the Corinthians to make an instantaneous judgment about him or any other evangelist. The fact that they were not perfectly mature meant that they could not take any kind of birds-eye view that would tell them where Paul stood in relation to them. Instead, they had to rely on a tool they could use effectively. They could look back across their Christian lives and consider every time that their paths intersected with Paul's. If they did so honestly, they would find that Paul never belittled them, he never discouraged them, and he never fostered any kind of division in the congregation. Instead, his every effort was spent in building them up, encouraging them, and helping

them to grow together into a functional body of Christ despite the divisions that many of their own had introduced. This was his commendation, and this is the same kind of guidance we ought to look for today.

To my mind, this means that we should not be quick to judge one another by an impersonal standard. It would be presumptuous for any one of us to claim that we can achieve the birds-eye view that was out of reach in the first century. There is no single question or list of questions that we can ask someone to test their sincerity and their maturity in Christ. Only experience can tell. Jesus Himself taught the same thing in Matthew 7:15-20, when He told His disciples to identify false prophets by their fruit, rather than their first impression.

This does not mean that there is not a right and a wrong in every question – if Paul's success was measured by the fact that the Corinthians were growing toward the image of God, then we must confess that there is *one* image of God toward which we all must grow. However, when we are dealing with questions of relative maturity, we must recognize that no one on this earth is fully mature. If we apply an impersonal test to ourselves, every one of us will fail. We must rely on time and experience to expose one another's works.

How can we identify a mature Christian? We will know them by their works.

- M. S.

Please direct all contributions to editor@christianprospect.com.

© 2021 Matthew Shaffer. This document may be copied and distributed verbatim. Content may not be altered without permission.