

## 1 CORINTHIANS 4:14-21

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter Paul has been looking at the nature of Christian leadership he refers to leaders as servants of Christ, men who are faithful servants, men who have been entrusted with the word of God. But the Corinthians were the very opposite of this.

Although Paul and his fellow apostles were humble servants, the church at Corinth had put Paul and the apostles on a pedestal and had caused divisions in the church because of their pride in their own preferred leader. Therefore last time we saw how Paul used sarcasm in order to expose the proud hearts of the Corinthians.

Now Paul tells us why he is so concerned to expose their faults and failing; he does so because he is their spiritual father and he loves them like any father loves his children. Therefore his love for them leads him to expose their sins and their faults in order that they might deal with them. He cannot stand by and watch as the church strays from God's word as a result of their pride and of their divisions.

He is their spiritual father he feels a responsibility towards them, he feels responsible for their spiritual welfare. Let us look then at the characteristics displayed by Paul as a spiritual father and let us all seek to follow his example. Paul's points are particularly useful for leaders who have responsibilities towards all who are under their care.

But his points are helpful and applicable to us all for we all seek to be mature in our Christian faith and so what Paul describes here are really marks of spiritual maturity because only those who are mature in the faith can really be spiritual fathers.

### 1. A SPIRITUAL FATHER HAS SPIRITUAL CHILDREN (v 15)

Paul makes it clear here that God used him to bring many of the Corinthians to faith in Christ. Paul did not give them spiritual life, he did not grant them salvation for only the Lord does that, but he was God's instrument in bringing many of these Corinthians to saving faith in Christ Jesus. In that sense he is their spiritual father, he led many to faith in Christ he was the one used by God to share the gospel with them and to point them to faith in Christ.

Now Paul says that the Corinthians had 10 thousand guardians in Christ. The word 'guardian' refers to home instructors usually slaves who were responsible for the basic training and moral upbringing of small children. They were not teachers in any formal sense but were guardians or helpers. Well Paul says that the Corinthians had many spiritual guardians some good and, no doubt, some not so good.

Some had been helpful and some not so helpful, perhaps some were seeking to get them to follow their leadership and to abandon Paul and his teaching. But Paul reminds the Corinthians that he was their spiritual father the one used by God to bring the gospel to the Corinthians and used by God to lead men and women to faith in Jesus Christ and to instruct them in the things of God.

Therefore Paul had a unique relationship with many of them in that he led them to Christ and established them in the faith.

I wonder if many of us here could call ourselves spiritual fathers because God in his goodness and grace has used us to bring the gospel to people and to lead them to faith in Jesus Christ. We are all guardians in Christ in one way or another for we are all responsible for the spiritual welfare of

one another and we are all responsible for instructing one another in the things of God. But how many of us have been used uniquely to lead people to faith in Jesus Christ.

Sadly many Christians have never become spiritual fathers because they do not know how to share their faith or how to lead people to genuine faith in Christ. Remember we cannot give eternal life to anyone that is God's task but we can be used by God to bring the gospel to people and to help them find Christ by teaching them through the Scriptures.

We can be used by God to ground new converts in their faith through biblical instruction but it is always sad when we personally are not able to be used by God because we are still immature, like little children even though we have been Christians for years. Being a Christian means reproducing ourselves, it is always our task to share the gospel with others and seek under God to point people to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Every Christian is God's instrument for sharing the gospel and for bringing people to Christ. Of course only God can save sinners and regenerate their hearts but we must always be willing to be used as God's instruments. But sadly God is unable to use so many of us because we simply are too immature or too proud or too self focused to be of use to God in the business of what used to be called soul winning.

We need to ask God to make us soul winners to make us useably so that God will bring many to faith and establish many in the faith through our faithful proclamation of the gospel message. Every one of us can be used of God it does not depend on age or ability it simply depends on our usability our willingness to be used for there is always a cost in being a servant of Jesus Christ. A cost, which it seems, less are prepared to pay in our self-centred world.

## 2. A SPIRITUAL FATHER EXERCISES DISCIPLINE TOWARDS HIS CHILDREN (v 14 & 18-21)

Paul was not being hard or harsh in his correction of the church at Corinth. His motives in doing so were not to 'shame' the church into action but to warn them and seek to admonish them in order to get them to repent and correct their ways (v 14). Now just as a physical father has to warn his children in order to get them to realise the seriousness of their actions so in the church there are times when spiritually mature Christians (Elders) have to warn spiritual children about their behaviour or their beliefs. In doing so our motives must always be to get our brothers or sisters in Christ to see the error of their way and to repent of any known sin and to change one's beliefs etc.

But the problem is that we do not always have pure motives when correcting others and so it is possible to correct others for the wrong reason i.e. to tear them down in order to exalt oneself.

So how can we keep our motives pure and act correctly towards those in our church that need corrected. Well Paul tells us in verse 14, for he calls the church "my dear children." It is a term of affection; it is often translated "my beloved children." In order words Paul loves these people he considers them dear to him and therefore his actions to warn them is done out of a heart that is full of love and affection for them.

Now that surely is the key in correcting others in our church when that is necessary. Do we truly love them? Are they dear to us? If so then our words of warning will surely be given with right motives. However if we cannot honestly say that we love the one who needs correcting if we cannot say that they are dear to us then it is better not to warn them for it is likely our warning will be done with wrong motives. True discipline in any home is successful when the children know that they are loved by their Parents and their Parents actions are done out of love for them.

So it is in the church, spiritual fathers who exercise discipline through words of warning to their spiritual children are more likely to be listened too if they are acting with a heart full of love and the spiritual children are aware of that fact.

We show our love for one another not just by words but also by consistent actions. If we say I am warning you in love but have not consistently expressed that love in actions then our warning is more likely to be treated with great suspicion. However if we have consistently demonstrated our love in practical ways, then it is likely that our words of warning will be heeded or at least accepted in the spirit of Christian love.

After all is that not the way our heavenly Father treats us with great loving and tender care. He warns us when we err but He always does so with love because we who are Christians and are dear to him. So let us ask God to help us to act like this towards our fellow believers when it is necessary.

However being loving towards our fellow Christians does not mean that we should be soft towards sin. It does not mean that we should never challenge and discipline when our fellow Christians refuse to heed our warnings and refuse to obey God's word. There were Christians at Corinth who were so arrogant in their attitude to Paul that no matter what Paul said they were never going to repent and act upon Paul's warnings (v 18).

They clearly thought that since Paul had not been at Corinth for some time now (probably well over two years) that he was all words for he was never going to come to Corinth to exercise discipline in the church (v 18). Therefore they could say and do what they liked; Paul isn't going to do anything about it. But Paul assures the church at Corinth he is planning to visit them soon but that very much depends upon the Lord's will rather than his own desire (v 19).

When he does come Paul is not going to be interested in what these arrogant people are saying but what power they are demonstrating in living out their Christian profession (v. 19). In other words there were professing Christians who were saying they were Christians and no doubt were responsible for the divisions in the church but do they have the power to live out their words? Paul confirms that the Kingdom of God is not about words only but about the power to live out those words in one's life (v 20).

It's easy to talk the talk but it is harder to walk the walk, Paul is going to see if the power of God is really in their lives and he will know that by how they live out their Christian profession. So Paul is coming to Corinth and when he comes he is going to exercise the discipline that is needed in the church at Corinth. If necessary he will come with a big stick (whip) not literally of course but in his actions.

If he needs to exercise church discipline by putting people out of the church he is prepared to do that for sin cannot be tolerated in the church. However Paul would like to come to Corinth and find that the people who are causing the divisions and trouble have repented in which case there will be no recriminations, Paul will simply deal with them with a gentle spirit (v 21).

Now the lesson is clear. True spiritual fathers and true leaders will exercise discipline in the church. They will not tolerate sin, they will warn and rebuke but if their warning is not heeded then they will take action, as we will see when we look at chapter 5 next time, which is all about the exercise of church discipline. We live in a church age when everything is softly, softly when professing Christians are allowed to sin without anyone warning them or rebuking them.

We live in a church age when church discipline is simply non-existent yet if any church is going to remain faithful to Christ and exercise a fruitful ministry within its neighbourhood then there must be church discipline. Sometimes that will be a word of warning, at other times it will be a word of

correction. Yet it must also be clear that should anyone not heed or listen to such warnings then there will come a time when formal church discipline must be carried out.

That could lead to removing someone from the membership of our church if the person concerned refuses to heed the warnings given. Such discipline is never harsh or hard but is always done in love and for the good of the sinning brother or sister. It is always done with the intention of restoring the sinning brother or sister to fellowship with Christ and His church. However I personally wish that I never have to exercise church discipline again in this church, I long that like Paul instead of dealing with you firmly because of your sin I can deal with you with great gentleness. This is why we should always treat sin seriously in our lives. We should always repent of it and confess it. We should heed words of warning from mature Christians and from your Elders.

But we must always be clear that should we refuse to do so then this church under God will exercise church discipline in order that the sinning Christian may see the error of their way and be restored to fellowship with Christ and with His church. The warning of church discipline here by Paul is to encourage a spirit of repentance in the Corinthians.

However it is also a clear warning that should no repentance be forthcoming then Paul will exercise that discipline that is necessary for the good of the sinning believer and for the good of the church and ultimately for the glory of Christ.

### 3 A SPIRITUAL FATHER SETS AN EXAMPLE FOR HIS CHILDREN (vs.16-17)

Without a good example a parent's teaching can never be effective. It is no good spending time teaching our children to cross the road safely if we ourselves wander out in the road holding their hand while cars whiz past us on either side. We simply have to set our children an example if we want them to say 'thank you' for receiving something then we must do likewise, otherwise our children will follow our example no matter what we tell them.

Now In the same way spiritual fathers must set an example to those who are our spiritual children. Mature, established Christians must set an example to those who are immature and new to the faith. Paul is able to say without boasting, "imitate me" and the Greek word used here for 'imitate' is a word from which we get our English word 'mimic'. Paul is saying to the church at Corinth do what I say; but also do what I do.

Paul is so confident that his example is a good one to follow that he going to send Timothy to Corinth just to remind the church about Paul's example in following Christ. Timothy was one of Paul's spiritual children (1 Timothy 1:2) who had followed Paul's example so he could tell the church first hand how Paul went about living his life for Christ.

Now for those of us in our congregation who are mature Christians we need to think much more carefully than perhaps we do about the example that we are setting to those who are younger in the faith. Could we without boasting say 'imitate me' because we are confident that we are following Christ? One of the problems of the church today as I see it, is that because we live in a very individualistic age we can be led into thinking that my actions do not affect anyone but me.

Therefore if I do not come to church then I am the only one affected by it. If someone or something becomes number 1 in my life then I am the only one affected by that. But that of course is not the case for your example affects others whether we like to think about that or not. How do young Christians work out in practise their Christian faith? They mostly do it through the example of others.

So what sort of example are we setting to younger Christians in this church by the way that we live out our Christian lives? I trust we are good examples to them.

But if you are still a young Christian by that I mean that you are a recent convert or still young in the faith or immature in the faith even though you have been a Christian for years then let me encourage you to follow the good examples that you find within this church. Mimic those who are really following Christ, watch how they work out their Christian faith in practise, listen to them speak to them and watch them.

Don't make them your 'hero' but simply aim to be like them for then you will be like Christ. You see it's not always easy to work out biblical principles in our everyday lives; the bible does not give us specific do's and don'ts for every situation in life. So watch how others apply the biblical principles and then follow their example, speak to other Christians about it and learn from one another. That's what Paul wanted the church at Corinth to do.

Paul's Christian life was consistent for he tells us that what he did was consistent with what he taught in all the churches (v 17) this is why he had no problem encouraging others to mimic him. Our problem is that often we know our lives are so inconsistent that we would be embarrassed if someone decided to follow our example. So often what we say we believe and how we live are poles apart.

So we say we believe in prayer but fail so often to pray. We say that God is sovereign yet live as if everything depended on us. We say we believe in the doctrine of the church yet our commitment to God's church can often be half hearted. We say we love others but live for self and so on. Paul did not have a fear about his own life, he believed that with God's help and grace his life was consistent, that what he said and believed was in line with what he did.

If we cannot say that, then we all need to ask God that in his mercy and grace he will make us consistent Christians. If we ask God to do that then we have to be prepared to pay the cost for God will make demands of us that perhaps until now we simply have not been prepared to do. But if we are going to be examples then we must be prepared for God to deal with us so that what we believe and what we do are completely compatible.

Therefore as we finish let us all resolve to be good examples to those who are younger in the faith and let us resolve to follow the example of those who are more mature and godlier than we are. In doing so we will follow Christ and bring glory to his name through our life and witness in His church

Amen