

**05/04/25      “The Features of a Spiritual Father”  
1 Corinthians 4:14-21**

Welcome...

So far in our study of 1 Corinthians we have seen many metaphors that Paul uses for ministry.

We are servants/slaves. 1 Corinthians 3:5, “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.”

We are farmers. 1 Corinthians 3:6, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.”

We are master builders. 1 Corinthians 3:10, “According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it.”

We are stewards. 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, “Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy.”

But today’s text includes the most moving metaphor... that is the role of a spiritual father.

1 Corinthians 4:15 “For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.”

Paul is laboring to reestablish his spiritual authority to speak into the lives of the Corinthian Christians. The Corinthians pride, arrogance, and worldly thinking had contributed to strife and division in the Corinthian church.

So, Paul must reestablish his right to give them commands, because God has positioned him in a special ministry as God’s apostle and as the Corinthians founding pastor and as Paul says in verse 15 “I became your father through the gospel.”

**\*Star Wars slide – In fact, I thought of renaming my sermon, “I am your father.” May the 4<sup>th</sup> be with you!**

**Now, let’s read 1 Corinthians 4:14-21...**

Any good parent will tell you that no matter how many people they love and respect, the love they have for their children is superior to them all. Paul spoke to the Corinthians as a parent. He wasn’t trying to beat them up . . . he wanted to spiritually wake them up.

We saw in my last sermon in 1 Corinthians 4:8-10 that the apostle Paul was stern, even to the point of sarcasm in rebuking the Corinthians’ sins. In our text this morning, he tells them why he has been so harsh: he loves them as a father loves his children.

**Main point: 1 Corinthians 4:14-21 lists six features of a faithful spiritual father who helps others to know and mature in Christ.**

**A spiritual father admonishes**

**A spiritual father loves**

**A spiritual father has spiritual children**

**A spiritual father sets an example**

**A spiritual father teaches**

## **A spiritual father disciplines**

Beyond Paul's unique role, we have a lasting pattern for being a spiritual parent to new disciples that all people can follow... a role that I would love to see multiplied here on the central coast. So all of us, whether men or women, boys or girls, need to understand this pattern of being a spiritual father... a spiritual parent

My prayer is that we all see that we can be spiritual parents, introducing others to Christ and helping them to mature in Christ.

### **I. A Spiritual Father Admonishes**

Verse 14...

Everyone is afraid of being put to shame. Let's first define guilt and shame. Guilt is the objective reality that I have committed an offense or a crime; shame is the subjective experience of feeling humiliation or distress because of what I have done. God has made us in such a way that sin incurs guilt and guilt generates shame.

Shame has a role in our sanctification, like physical pain has a role in our lives here on earth. When we sin, we are supposed to take it seriously and feel the distress and embarrassment of having let Christ down.

Like when Peter when he denied knowing Christ the third time, and at that exact moment, the rooster crowed, and Jesus turned and stared right at him! Jesus' look at Peter must have burned into his very soul! Then immediately, Matthew 26:75 tells us Peter went outside and wept bitterly.! That feeling he had at that moment was shame.

But Jesus would later talk to Peter and restore him, and God worked in and through Peter in powerful ways for God's glory.

Paul is willing to use shame from time to time. Look at 1 Corinthians 5:1-2a...

You can almost hear Paul say, "your ought to be ashamed."

Look at 1 Corinthians 6:5...

But why does Paul say he is NOT trying to shame the Corinthians in 1:14? Well, I think he means he doesn't want them to be overwhelmed in shame, but to heed the warning to turn from their pride and arrogance and to humbly trust Christ and change in Christ. Paul's goal was to bring about a change of heart and changed manner of life in them.

Some fathers are either too soft, neglectful, and tolerant, allowing their kids to do whatever they want, and some fathers are too harsh, abusive, denying them affirmation and love.

You see this a lot in the sports world, as the abusive father tries to live out his dreams through his son. I grew up not too far from Baltimore where major league baseball player Rafael Palmeiro played first base.

When Rafael was in high school, he hit a long line drive that hit the fence 396 feet away; it was a double. His father came out onto the field to berate his son and said, "If you were a real man, you would have cleared that fence!" That's the way he was all through his son's career. Every time you go two for four, his dad would call him and say, "What about the other two at-bats?" This is kind of man that he was. And Rafael Palmeiro said, "This drove me onto excellence."

Well, it'll drive some him to excellence, but too many other children it would be destructive. History is actually filled with abusive fathers who pushed their children to perform, deprived them of affection, provoked them to wrath.

Colossians 3:21 says, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart."

Paul was not a heavy handed abusive spiritual father, but he also was not a soft, indulgent spiritual father who failed to warn his children of the dangers.

Notice again verse 14...

The word "admonish" (*noutheteō*) means literally "to put in mind," with the purpose of warning and reproof. It presupposes that something is wrong, and its intention is to correct, to make right. Its purpose is to bring about a change—in belief, attitude, habit, lifestyle, or in whatever way is needed.

Biblical counseling is nouthetic counseling. The faithful biblical counselor counsels from the Bible to help the counselee see hope in Christ as well as the need for change.

Romans 12:2 says, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12, "'You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.'"

A spiritual father admonishes.

## II. A Spiritual Father Loves

Verse 14...

Paul is a spiritual father talking to his sons and daughters at Corinth. His concerns are parental and relational. He will correct their immature behavior, but he will do so with tender care and encouragement. They are not merely children but beloved children, especially dear to their spiritual father.

Now, it is clear from what Paul has been saying to them that they were not obedient, morally upright, doctrinally sound, or mature. But they were loved.

The word "beloved" is from the verb *agapaō*, which refers to the strongest kind of love, the deepest love. It is more than brotherly love (*philia*), a tender affection. It is a love that is determined and willful, having the one purpose of serving the object of love.

Some years later Paul again spoke of his great love for them in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13 "Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts to us also."

2 Corinthians 12:14-15 "I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls"

3 John 4 “I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” Paul is in the opposite position here: There is no greater anguish than to hear that his spiritual children in Corinth are NOT walking in the truth.

But Paul is motivated by a genuine love for his spiritual children. And so should we. If we have the privilege of leading someone else to the Lord, pray for them and stay connected with them. They will struggle, and have their ups and downs, but you can stay committed to them, praying for them, and be willing to spend time with them to help them grow in Christ. Paul’s testimony to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:31 was that he tearfully admonished “night and day for a period of three years” out of love for his children in the faith.

A spiritual father admonishes, a spiritual father loves, and third:

### **III. A Spiritual Father Has Spiritual Children**

Verse 15...

Paul here illustrates the uniqueness of fatherhood. No child can have more than one natural father. In the spiritual realm as well, the Corinthians had countless tutors in Christ but only one spiritual father.

The term “Tutors” refers to home instructors, usually slaves, who were responsible for the basic training and moral upbringing of small children. They were not teachers in a formal sense but were more guardians and helpers.

The Corinthians, Paul tells them, could have had innumerable spiritual tutors of various sorts, and all of those may have been helpful to one degree or another. But he alone was uniquely their spiritual father.

Paul is not claiming to be their Savior... but rather the human instrument by which Christ saved His people. Jesus Christ, not Paul, shed His blood for them on the cross... Jesus Christ, not Paul, was raised from the dead for them. Furthermore, only the Holy Spirit can make someone be born again.

John 3:5-6 “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

God saves sinners by His sovereign power and He uses the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, as written and proclaimed in the word of God. But God uses human servants to work his will in the lives of the elect.

Paul would say in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

A man can be a man without having children and even a husband without having children. But he cannot be a father without having children. A Christian cannot be a spiritual father without being used by God to bring life to spiritual children.

Every Mother’s Day, we celebrate the blessing that children are and especially the new little ones born in the life of the church over the past year. How delightful it would be to have just as many spiritual babies, new Christians, needing to be trained in the gospel by their spiritual parents!

Whenever we share the Gospel with someone and have the joy of leading them to faith in Christ, we become a “spiritual parent” in their life. This does not give us any special authority over their faith, but it *does* create a special relationship that God can use to help them grow in the local church.

A spiritual father admonishes, he loves, he has spiritual children, and fourth:

#### **IV. A Spiritual Father Sets the Example for His Children**

Verse 16...

So much of life is caught as well as taught. You watch a role model do it a certain way, and then you know what to do. So it is with Christianity; Jesus Christ came into the world to save us from our sins, and he could have appeared one day and died on the cross that afternoon, but He also came to give us an example of a holy life.

1 Peter 2:21: “For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”

Twice in 1 Corinthians here in 4:16 and then in 11:1 Paul says, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.” With confidence, but without bragging, he could say, be imitators of me. He not only could say, “Do as I say,” but also, “Do as I do.” The Greek word translated “imitate” is *mimetai*, from which we get our word *mimic*.

D.A. Carson writes, “What Paul wants them to imitate is his passion to live life in the light of the cross of Christ.”

Someone once said, “There's no better sermon than a good example.”

Paul presents his life as the model they are to emulate, giving them a command in present imperative which can only be obeyed as we depend on the Holy Spirit. We all need mentors in Christ, persons like Paul who model the life of faith

Because they didn't have printing back then, Paul couldn't just hand out Bibles. People had to learn the gospel by watching his life and following his example.

The same can be true for you and me. For some people in your workplace, your family, your neighborhood, and your school, your life, your example is the only Bible they will read.

Paula and I were skiing a couple years ago at Whistler, in British Columbia. We went to the peak to do a 7-mile trail called the Peak to Creek. We had an experienced local couple explain the route to us, but they were going on a different trail. We started out way down, but something did not seem right. And when I stopped and waited, eventually a guy came by and I asked if we were on the right trail. He said, “You are not on any trail, you are off the trails and outside the ski area boundaries and heading into the wilderness.”

I received directions, but I did not have someone to be an example and show me the way.

God calls us to know Christ, to become more like Christ, and to make Christ known by sharing the good news of the gospel. But we also need someone to model the process of abiding in Christ and obeying Him.

Christian mothers and fathers, you have a wonderful opportunity to set an example for your children and them how to live for Christ.

Paul told his children in the faith to imitate him—to follow his example. Are you living for Christ in such a way that we want our children to imitate us?

One way that you can make an impact on the next generation is to be a Sunday School teacher. If you look in your bulletin you will see that we have a need for Sunday School teachers. Please see Pastor Dan if you are interested.

A spiritual father admonishes, loves, has spiritual children, sets an example. Fifth:

## **V. A Spiritual Father Teaches His Children**

Verse 17...

Paul sent Timothy (also one of his spiritual children) to remind the church of the doctrines and practices that Paul always taught.

While the Corinthians were beloved like Timothy, they could hardly be called faithful like Timothy, who 2 Timothy 3:10-11 tells us had "followed (Paul's) teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings."

There is a clear connection of teaching and lifestyle. Faithfully teaching and applying the Word precedes all true Christian living.

In Acts 18 we see that Paul had already taught the Corinthians carefully for eighteen months. They had been thoroughly grounded in the Word.

Paul had taught the same truths everywhere in every church, indicating that he is referring to doctrine rather than some specific advice, and Timothy's job was to reinforce those great eternal truths by his own teaching and his own example.

Christ's most powerful ministry to the crowds was not healing them or feeding them, but teaching them the word of God. In Mark 6:34 "When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things."

When you are blessed with a baby, your child comes into the world perfectly ignorant of everything. Your child will learn as he observes you and you teach him. Spiritually, no one naturally knows the Bible... so a spiritual father needs to patiently teach, explain, and live out the Word.

Paul says in Acts 20:20, "You know 'how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house.'"

Acts 20:27 "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."

Paul does not teach one thing at this church and something different at another church.

We need men and women like that today. For you fathers out there, are you teaching the word to your children?

For you disciplers, are you just meeting for coffee and having friendly conversations. Or are you helping another to know the Word and apply it to their lives?

A spiritual father admonishes, loves, has spiritual children, sets an example, teaches, and sixth:

## **VI. A Spiritual Father Disciplines His Children**

Verses 18-21...

Paul had been patient with their pride and disobedience, but now he warned them that the time had come for discipline. Paul was not like the tolerant modern mother who shouted at her spoiled son, “This is the last time I’m going to tell you for the last time!”

A faithful parent must discipline his children. It is not enough to teach them and be an example before them; you must also discipline them when they rebel and refuse to obey. Paul would have preferred to come with meekness and deal with their sins in a gentle manner, but their own attitude made this difficult. They were puffed up—and 1 Corinthians 5:2 makes it clear that they were even proud of their disobedience!

The contrast in 1:18-21 is between *speech* and *power*, words and deeds. The arrogant Corinthians had no problem “talking big,” the way children often will do; but they could not back up their talk with their “walk.” Their religion was only in words.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:5 Paul writes, “for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”

When Paul comes to Corinth, he will not be impressed by their “word”; he won’t really care “how these arrogant people are talking,” no matter how eloquent their rhetoric. No, he will be interested in only one thing: What power do they have?

Specifically, the power of the gospel, the power to forgive, to transform, to call men and women out of darkness and into the kingdom of God’s dear Son. Mere talk will not change people; only the gospel of Jesus Christ will change their hearts. So, Paul is going to ask for their credentials: What people has your eloquence genuinely transformed by bringing them into a personal knowledge of the crucified Messiah?

Then Paul gives the Corinthians a choice. Verse 21...

From the Greco-Roman point of view this “rod” was a symbol of discipline executed by one in authority. Paul himself had physically been punished by rods more than once. But Paul does not have in mind a literal stick to beat them with, but an attitude and spirit of strong, painful biblical discipline. He would deal sternly with their pride, the sin God hates most.

The threat here in verse 21 is the discipline from the Lord.

Hebrews 12:5-6 “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

Paul is not on some kind of ego trip here. Rather, Paul knows that Jesus Christ has raised him up to teach the details of the gospel to the Gentile churches; if they turn away from Paul, they are really turning away from Christ. Paul loves the Corinthians as his children and he loves them too much to let them go on acting like fools.

When our children were younger and Paula was homeschooling them, I told Paula, “If the children disobey you and you need the principal to discipline them, write their offenses down and when I get home, I will deal with it.”

And as I drove home, verse 21 would resonate in my head, “Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?”

If there was disobedience, I knew that my children needed the rod of discipline first. Then there would be confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, revisiting the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and prayer and much love and affirmation. Our children still like us today! The love Paula even though she reported their disobedience to me, and they still love me even though I was faithful to administer painful discipline to them.

What are the features of a faithful spiritual father?

A spiritual father admonishes

A spiritual father loves

A spiritual father has spiritual children

A spiritual father sets an example

A spiritual father teaches

A spiritual father disciplines

Paul would write to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”

May God enable us to see this pattern replicated again and again as we know Christ and make Him known here on the central coast of California.

Let's pray...