

MESSAGE TITLE: Celebrating Spiritual Fathers

SCRIPTURE: I Corinthians 4:14-21

KEY TRUTH

Every father should desire to raise children who live with dependence on and demonstration of the power of the gospel.

GETTING STARTED

Who introduced you to Christ? Where would you be if that person had said nothing to you about Jesus? As we celebrate Father's Day, we also want to take time to remember the spiritual fathers and mothers who took the time and attention to share Christ with us. We also want to prayerfully and intentionally consider ways we can become spiritual parents – those who courageously share the Gospel with people who are far from God and close to us. May God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, give us the desire to become spiritual parents.

OBSERVATION

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-17.

It would have been easy to misunderstand Paul's intentions here. He did not engage in sarcasm and mention his trials as an apostle to shame the Corinthians. Sensitive readers at Corinth were put to shame by the contrast between Paul's humility and their own pride. Yet, Paul's goal was not to shame them, but to warn or admonish them.

What did Paul mean in verse 15 when he stated that he had become their father?

How might the Corinthians' attitudes have been different if they had already been imitating Paul? What was going to have to change for them to take seriously his words in verse 16?

Why did Paul want to send Timothy to Corinth? What did he hope Timothy's visit would accomplish?

As a practical expression of his fatherly love, Paul planned to send Timothy, perhaps along with this letter. Paul loved Timothy as his dear son and trusted him in the work of ministry (Acts 17:15; 1 Thess. 3:1-3). So, Paul commended Timothy to the Corinthian believers as a man who was faithful in the Lord. Timothy had proven himself to be a loyal follower of Christ and a reliable leader of the church.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:18-21.

In Paul's absence, some members of the church had become bold in their stances. They had probably grown confident in their opposition to Paul, assuming he would never return to challenge them.

Why do you think some of the people had become arrogant in Paul's absence? What does this tell us about their pride and priorities?

What do you think Paul means when he says that the kingdom of God is "not a matter of talk"?

Why were Paul's options in verse 21 so extreme?

Put simply, Paul said, "Talk is cheap." Paul would expose his opponents by showing that their ministries failed to display the work of the Holy Spirit. If the Corinthians continued to follow human pride by dividing the church into factions, Paul would rebuke them harshly on his arrival. If they recommitted themselves to the true humility that comes from the gospel, he would come peacefully. Paul offered this choice in the hope they would choose the latter.

APPLICATION

Are there any Christian mentors, teachers, or leaders whose actions you seek to imitate as a fully devoted Christ follower? How has their example shaped your walk with Christ?

What would need to change for you to live the kind of life you want others to imitate?

Are there any younger believers for whom you are modeling how to be "all in" with your faith? Who has God placed in your life for you to lead in this way?

I heard recently from a young woman who wrote to thank her pastor for leading her to faith Christ. She celebrates her spiritual birthday every year like someone would celebrate a traditional birthday. Take some time this week to write a thank you note to your spiritual parent – the person who led you to Christ.

Take some time in your group to pray for your five – the people in your life who are far from God and close to you.

PRAYER

Close your group time in prayer. Thank God for the sending His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to bring salvation. Thank Him for sending to you a spiritual father or mother at the right time who cared enough to share with you the truth of the Gospel. Ask God to put courage in you to become a spiritual parent to others.

COMMENTARY NOTES

4:14. Paul did not engage in sarcasm and mention his trials as an apostle to shame the Corinthians. Sensitive readers at Corinth were put to shame by the contrast between Paul's humility and their own pride. Yet, Paul's goal was not to shame them, but to warn or admonish them. That is, though he intended to shame them to some degree, their shame was not his ultimate goal. He employed shame as a tool for admonishing them, for inspiring them to reject their pride and repair their divisions. Paul wanted to

help the Corinthian church imitate his own life, and thereby to help them avoid the consequences of the sin in their church. Love, not anger, motivated Paul to do this. He cared for the Corinthians as his dear children, and this affection guided his words.

4:15. Paul was justified in calling himself the father of the Corinthians. They may have had ten thousand guardians, various leaders and teachers in the church. Nevertheless, they had only one spiritual father. Paul became their father when he first brought them to faith in Christ through the preaching of the gospel.

4:16. Paul's warnings were given as admonitions from a loving father to his children. Based on his fatherly role in the Corinthian church, Paul urged his readers to imitate him, just as children are instructed to follow the example of their fathers. He told others to imitate him as well (Gal. 4:12; 2 Thess. 3:7). Here, he encouraged the Corinthians to forsake their pride and to gain the same kind of humility he demonstrated.

4:17. As a practical expression of his fatherly love, Paul planned to send Timothy, perhaps along with this letter. Paul loved Timothy as his dear son and trusted him in the work of ministry (Acts 17:15; 1 Thess. 3:1–3). So, Paul commended Timothy to the Corinthian believers as a man who was faithful in the Lord. Timothy had proven himself to be a loyal follower of Christ and a reliable leader of the church. Paul assured his readers that Timothy could be trusted to remind them of Paul's way of life in Christ Jesus. That is, Timothy would tell them more of the sufferings and faithful service Paul had rendered as an apostle and of Paul's way of life when he had been in Corinth previously—both of which Paul would have the Corinthians imitate. Timothy's efforts would be reliable because he agreed with what Paul taught in every church—he would not vary from the apostle's true teachings. Paul sent Timothy as an act of love in the hope that the younger minister would be able to facilitate the restoration of the Corinthian fellowship.

4:18-19a. Paul worried that some of his readers had become arrogant, thinking he would never return to Corinth. In Paul's absence, these members of the church had become bold in their stances. They had probably grown confident in their opposition to Paul, assuming he would never return to challenge them. Even so, Paul warned them that he would come ... very soon. Paul frequently revealed his keen desire to visit the churches of Christ throughout the world (Rom. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:18). This should have encouraged his opposition to rethink their attitudes and to correct their behavior, or else to prepare themselves to deal with one imbued not with mere words, but with power (1 Cor. 5:4). Although some people in the church did not believe it, Paul was determined to come to Corinth.

Still, he admitted that his desire was not ultimately the determining factor in his travel plans. He qualified his intention by saying, "If the Lord is willing". Paul planned to spend the winter in Corinth after traveling through Macedonia (1 Cor. 16:5-7).

4:19b-20. Paul explained that upon his arrival he would find out two things. He would investigate how these arrogant people were talking. He would find out for himself exactly what they were saying and what power they had. He wanted to see if these proud leaders who opposed him had the gifts and demonstrations of the Holy Spirit to back up their theological claims. He wanted to demonstrate to them that their “gospel” lacked the power to mend lives and create unity. Paul mentioned the power of God on several occasions, having in mind God’s works in the church (1:18; 6:14; 15:43).

The apostle then gave the reason for his focus on the power of the Spirit in his opponents. The kingdom of God does not consist of talk. It consists of power. Put simply, Paul said, “Talk is cheap.” Anyone can use words to persuade the naive, but Paul would expose his opponents by showing that their ministries failed to display the work of the Holy Spirit.

4:21. Paul had spoken rather forcefully to the Corinthians. He closed this section with a pointed question: In coming to visit and test his readers, how should he treat them? Should he come like Jesus cleansing the temple (Mark 11:15), with a whip to drive out his opponents who refused to change their ways? Or should he come to them with love and with a gentle spirit, they having heeded his warnings and changed their ways? The use of the word ‘rod’ pictures a father who is faithful to correct his disobedient children.

If the Corinthians continued to follow human pride by dividing the church into factions, Paul would rebuke them harshly on his arrival. If they recommitted themselves to the true humility that comes from the gospel, he would come peacefully. Paul offered this choice in the hope they would choose the latter.

SOURCES CONSULTED

ESV Study Bible

HCSB Study Bible

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