

1Corinthians 4:14- 17 "Marks of A Spiritual Father"

Well, we're about a quarter of the way through this letter to the Corinthians and through most of it so far Paul has been dealing with some problems in this church, not the least of which are the divisions that have crippled their ability to faithfully represent Jesus Christ and do the work of the gospel He's called them to.

The first part of this letter could not have been very easy for them to read; not that they didn't deserve this exhortation from Paul, but I'm sure their pride may have caused them to recoil to some degree until the reality of what they were doing sunk in and they began to repent of their rebellious attitudes.

Paul has been dealing with quarreling, division, pride, worldliness, and immaturity in their walk with Christ; not the kinds of things you would want to put on your resume as a local church.

But through all of this Paul still makes it quite clear that he still loves them as brothers and sisters in Christ. He opens this letter, "to the **church** of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus."

He calls them brethren or brothers six times from the first to the fourth chapters alone. In the Greek the word brothers is *adelphos*, and it is a term which refers to siblings of the same family. Paul considered himself to be in the same family of God with these Corinthian believers.

And now, as we continue in our text, we are going to see how Paul takes this brotherhood in Christ and begins to show how precious these people are to him despite the fact that he has had some hard things to say to them.

1CO 4:14 "I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children."

Paul may have felt that there were some, if not most, who received this letter in Corinth, who believed that maybe he was trying to use them as an example as he embarrassed them.

Again, keep in mind that it was customary for all of Paul's letters to be copied and passed on to all of the churches, because the churches knew this was the very word of God being delivered to them. This was the practice of all letters written by the apostles as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This letter was written around A.D. 54. But there were three previous letters written by Paul to the Galatians and the Thessalonians, which by this time the Corinthians had in their possession.

They knew this letter addressed to them was to be taken to all the churches and it was not very flattering and Paul knew this, which is why he makes it a point to tell them that this is not meant to shame them. In other words, this letter was not meant to be the means of punishing them before the world.

Hopefully, after reading this letter, they were shamed by their own behavior, because this letter was meant to admonish or warn them. If there was to be any shame it was to come from their own realization that God was unhappy with them, not because they felt other churches would be made aware of their sin.

How many times do we fear that maybe someone will discover something about us which, if revealed, will make us look bad or unspiritual. It's a natural reaction. But, if hiding sin from people is our only concern then we've missed the point of how much we have grieved God.

And until we realize how much it does grieve God, we will continue on that path because we think as long as no one else in the body knows I'm O.K. Paul is making it clear to these Corinthians that their first order of business is to know how much they have displeased God and they must take appropriate action which is to repent.

This doesn't mean that every sin we are involved in must be disclosed to the church. If that were the case we'd have lines of people every time we met. But it does mean that the church is the one place where sin can be dealt with in a way that still loves the brother or sister.

It should be the sin that shames, is Paul's point, not the process of trying to reconcile or correct the sin. Now, obviously there will still be a sense of shame even in that process because of our pride, but that must be secondary to the shame we should have before our God which must motivate us to come before Him for forgiveness.

And if God forgives then the church must be willing to forgive as well, and accept that repentant person as one who is still part of the family of Christ. And so, ideally, if someone is struggling with sin and it is exposed, the body should not spend it's time in the

shaming mode, it should lovingly teach, rebuke if called for, correct and train in righteousness, as Paul tells Timothy. (2Tim.3:16)

The body of Christ is meant to be a supportive family, not a family which tears down. This doesn't mean we wink at sin, it just means we're there for each other when such problems arise, because we're all sinners, and we're all capable of finding ourselves in need of such support and love and acceptance during those hard times.

This is why Paul calls these Corinthian believers "my dear children", as the NIV puts it. I like the way the NASB, NKJV and KJV puts it when they say, "my beloved children".

The word beloved gives more of a sense of the original language which is the Greek word *agapetos*; a form of the verb *agape*. This is the kind of love which is not limited to emotions, or is utilized only when things are going well. It is, as one commentator puts it, "a love that is determined and willful, having the purpose of serving the object of love." (John MacArthur)

Paul was hurt that these people would dishonor their God and represent Him in such a horrible way. "They were not obedient, morally upright, doctrinally sound, or mature. But they were loved." (MacArthur)

Paul's intention was to help them back to the path which Christ had placed them on. His intention was not to put a boot in the middle of their back to keep them in the mud. He loved them too much to do that. They were beloved children; loved by Paul and most of all, loved by Christ who purchased them with His own blood.

Should they have felt a sense of shame for their sin? Absolutely! But Paul is not going to add to that shame if they were willing to repent and accept his love to help them through this time.

He sees himself as being responsible for their growth because he was the one who led most of them to Christ. Paul planted that church in Corinth. He spent a year and a half teaching and loving them with the truth of the gospel. Notice what he says in verse 15.

1CO 4:15 "Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel."

This is a very revealing passage about Paul's connection with these people. He makes reference to them having ten thousand guardians in Christ. The word ten thousand in the Greek is not necessarily a particular number. It's a word which is used as hyperbole, an exaggeration.

Paul actually means an innumerable amount of guardians, or as other translations put it, instructors or tutors in Christ. The idea here is that these people may have been flooded with more tutors than you could count and they all may have contributed to their growth. But a million teachers doesn't replace one true father. And this is how Paul sees himself in relation to these people whom he loved in the Lord.

By the way, a tutor or instructor was a person in the ancient world who was usually a slave who was given the responsibility by the slave owners to look after their children. They would walk them to class, instruct them in the ways of the world, and generally teach them the things they needed to succeed.

Paul was saying that whatever tutor these Corinthians had for their own growth, they could never replace the love a true parent has for his child. This is why he says, "in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel."

The only thing he means by this is that just as a natural father is involved in the birth of his child, Paul was personally involved in the spiritual birth of these people as he shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with them and they came to faith through his love and ministry.

They were the fruit of his ministry. But we come to a passage like Mat.23:9 and we might wonder if Paul hasn't over-stepped his boundaries in referring to himself as their spiritual father.

MAT 23:9 "And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven."

How do these two passages square with each other? Well, as we've always said, when studying the Scriptures we take the whole counsel of the word of God, comparing Scripture with Scripture, and dealing with the context in which we find any passage.

These are basic rules for interpretation. And so, we must ask ourselves, who was Jesus speaking to and what was the context in which He spoke these words?

First, he was speaking to the Pharisees and pronouncing woes on them for placing unnecessary burdens on the people.

MAT 23:2-5 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 "Everything they do is done for men to see:..."

Here Jesus speaks of leaders in Israel who want the titles of Rabbi and teacher and father with the express purpose of lording it over the flock of God as though they were the final authority and all must bow to them.

Jesus says, there is only one whom we must bow to who has all authority and that is God. Place no man in that position. And this is precisely why Jesus continues with the exhortation in the following verses.

MAT 23:8-10 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. 9 And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ."

If Jesus meant that our natural fathers are not to be called father then we would have to change the 10 commandments which state clearly that we are to honor our fathers and mothers.

Or, if our Lord meant we can never use the word father in any other way than addressing God our father we would have to question Jesus' acceptance of the term the way it was used by the Jews on Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem .

MAR 11:10 "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"  
"Hosanna in the highest!"

David was not the literal father of these Jews and yet he was a father in the sense that he was their forefather both in a physical way and also in a spiritual way as he was a king of Israel and forerunner of the King of kings whom they identified with.

And so, for Paul to use the term father, as it relates to his relationship to these Corinthians, is not outside the scope of what was biblically acceptable, because he means nothing more than,

like a father's love for his children, Paul loves these children of God.

Unfortunately, there are cults and religious organizations which mean much more by the term father as they use it. The cult the "Manifest sons of God", for example, also known as the "Latter Rain Movement", have leaders whom are referred to as father, who are known to bind the consciences of people who come under their rule.

We had a young man who visited this church a few years ago who belonged to this cult, and he referred to what we might call a pastor, as his father. It was weird because whenever he referred to this man he literally called him dad. At first we thought he was talking about his biological father, but it didn't take long before we knew it was his spiritual leader.

And he didn't mean that this was his spiritual father in the sense Paul means it in our text because this "father" essentially directed their lives. Any decision they made went through "dad". And problems they had were always directed to "dad". Any relationships they might enter into had to be approved by "dad."

Jesus would say of such a relationship, "do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven." The leader of this cult essentially replaced our heavenly Father and assumed a role reserved only for God.

The same could be said of the Roman Pope of the Catholic church. In fact, the word Pope is a derivative of the word papa, meaning father. Men bow to him as though he were a father representing Christ on earth.

He is a man who has assumed a role reserved only for God. He is not the head of the church on earth. He is not infallible as it relates to decisions he makes for the church. And he cannot change the rules for the way in which we come to God, as the Popes have done through the years.

But for any Pastor or leader to love Christ's sheep like a father loves his children is a gift any congregation should welcome. And it should be the desire for any Pastor to pray for such a love for the flock even as Peter was encouraged by Jesus to love the flock as he tended and shepherded the sheep of Jesus.

You see, Paul makes it clear that his relationship to them as a father only comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the

connection. And that's what connects all of us and what should promote the unity Paul has been talking about all through this letter to the Corinthians.

In fact, Paul's love for them and his relationship with them was so close that he could actually ask them to imitate him as a son would imitate his father.

1CO 4:16 "Therefore I urge you to imitate me."

Was Paul being pompous or presumptuous in making this statement? Was he elevating himself to the level of being on an equal par with Christ who is sinless and perfect?

Not at all. He is speaking as an apostle who loves the Lord Jesus Christ. He is speaking as a child of God who has followed the Lord and strove to serve Christ every day of his life in the power of the Spirit. His life did characterize love and obedience to Christ. And to the degree that he followed the Lord, he is asking the church to follow him in practicing love and obedience to Christ.

He puts it a little differently later on in this letter.

1CO 11:1 "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

And so, this most clear passage defines what some might call a less clear passage in 1Cor.4:16.

The writer of Hebrews even extends this pattern of following other leaders who follow Christ in the ways of the word of God.

HEB 13:7 "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."

Don't imitate their shortcomings or their bad decisions, but imitate their faith as they walk by faith and not by sight. This puts a great deal of responsibility on leaders to live lives that imitate Christ as they seek to please the Lord as an example to the flock.

Peter puts it this way as it relates to leaders.

1PE 5:2-4 "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, **but being examples to the flock.** 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

But part of Paul's love for the flock in Corinth is going to be shown in a practical way. At the present Paul is not able to visit the Corinthians personally. And so, instead of just talking about what they must do, he does the next best thing. He sends a faithful servant who, himself, has proved to be an example to the flock.

1CO 4:17 "For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church."

It appears that at the writing of this letter Timothy has not yet arrived in Corinth. Nor does he appear to be the one who is delivering this letter. No mention is made of Timothy until this point in the letter which assumes his arrival is in the future.

But because of Paul's love for the Corinthian church he gives them the hope that someone who is also considered a spiritual child of Paul will be there for them. ***For this reason***, Paul says, I have sent to you Timothy.

What reason is that? Well, because of what he just previously said in verses 14 -16, which have dealt with their need for admonition as children, and their need to be imitators of Paul.

It's one thing to tell people how to live for Christ. It's another thing to personally show them as well as instruct, which is what Timothy would be expected to do.

Paul identifies Timothy in a couple of ways. First, as my son whom I love. Again, Paul makes it plain that as he is like a father to these Corinthians, he is also a spiritual father to Timothy in that it appears that Paul nurtured Timothy in Christ as he took him under his wing.

ACT 16:1-3 "[Paul] came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. 2 The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek."

But he also refers to Timothy as being faithful in the Lord. You don't give responsibility to be an example to the flock or to instruct the flock unless that servant of Christ is both capable of giving instruction and has proven himself to be faithful to Christ and His work.

To prove yourself you must be doing the work. Often times men in a church are given the positions of deacon or elder in hopes of assuming the role of elder or deacon and doing the work of those offices.

The way our Lord expects these men to be serving in any official capacity is if they are already demonstrating that they have the gifts and the call from God, as they are already practicing what is expected of an elder or deacon, or pastor for that matter, prior to them being placed in that position.

Paul saw the life of Timothy. He saw how Timothy would encourage the saints in the different cities to which they traveled. He saw how Timothy was faithful to take what he learned from Paul and in turn teach it to others. He saw how Timothy was willing to continue to travel with Paul when the path was hard.

Paul trusted Timothy with the sheep of Jesus Christ as though Paul himself were going there to instruct and be that example. Every Pastor should pray for Timothy's who can be trusted to lighten the load and be that encouragement and who can be relied on without having to prod them.

Timothy was instructed to go to Corinth to remind them of Paul's ways which are in Christ Jesus, just as he taught in every church.

What this means is that Timothy was not going with his own agenda. He was going as a representative of Christ who had revealed His will through the apostle Paul and his writings.

What Paul learned from Christ, as the Holy Spirit revealed it to him, is what Timothy taught. And here, this is in reference to doctrines concerning salvation and sanctification. Timothy was not going to take a different message as it related to salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone.

He was also not going to take a different message as to the way in which we were to grow and be imitators of Christ as we are daily conformed into His image in the power of the Spirit.

Timothy was a capable teacher. But he had a good teacher who was able to disciple him. And as a good disciple he learned and grew and then used those gifts in conjunction with his responsibilities to teach the body of Christ faithfully.

But what's interesting here is that Paul makes it clear that he's not giving them some special revelation from God for their particular

problems. He's not going to give them special treatment that would not be consistent with what he gives every church.

He says, "Timothy will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church."

Just as Timothy was to be faithful with the truth, Paul too, was faithful to be consistent with the word of God and teach the whole counsel of God's word, no matter how it might make some feel uncomfortable. He was not going to compromise.

And so, just because it may have looked like Paul might be picking on them, he is assuring them that every other church would be encouraged in the same way if they needed it.

In fact, we know this to be the case. Read through the letter to the Romans some time, or the Galatians, for example, where Paul said to them, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all." (GAL 1:6-7)

What about the Ephesians?

EPH 4:1-3 "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Whether it was the Philippians or the Colossians, or when writing to Timothy or Titus, Paul always taught the same way and always encouraged the saints to live to the glory of God in the power of the Spirit, as we are all called to be faithful witnesses.

The Corinthians could not say that Paul was giving them special attention or was being unusually critical. He was only loving them as a father would love his children, desiring that they grow up in the faith to represent the only Father who ultimately counted, our heavenly Father.

There hasn't been a church that has ever existed that doesn't need to hear such encouragement and exhortation from time to time. None of us are above the teaching which Paul gives here in Corinthians and other places. But praise God that no matter what we as individuals or as a church may be involved in there is always

forgiveness and the knowledge that we are beloved children of Christ.

But we receive that through a humble attitude. Or as David put it, "through a broken and contrite spirit." Sin must always be repented of, and Paul was encouraging these Corinthians to do just that.

Paul's only concern is that the Corinthians would begin to imitate Christ and honor Him in the process. And if he can be an example in that process, so be it, to God's glory.

May those who come into contact with us be able to say, that we are like Christ whom they can look to for encouragement and find the same forgiveness and hope as we have which is found in Him. And in that hope and forgiveness may we demonstrate thankfulness which is found in our faithfulness to our Lord and Master and Savior.