

1Corinthians 4:18-21 "How Should We Respond to Our Father's Discipline?"

Paul's love and concern for these Christians in Corinth is a love that doesn't coddle them when they need a firm hand. It is not a love that overlooks problems, hoping they'll go away. Instead, his love for them is a like a parent's love for his children.

When our children are little is when we have the greatest influence over their lives, either for good or bad. But, because of our position over them as parents, we have a responsibility to love them enough to correct them when it is necessary.

Now, granted they may not fully understand such correction as love, but it is. Our Lord makes this abundantly clear when referring to us as children of God.

HEB 12:5-8 "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, 6 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." 7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? 8 If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons."

Remember, that Paul understood how these Corinthians may have mistakenly thought how his hard line with them was being abusive and not loving.

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

But, because he saw himself as a spiritual father to them, he was only loving them with the truth, not to simply shame them, but to wake them up to the reality of their responsibility to their heavenly Father who will not wink at sin.

These Corinthians can either take the responsibility of repenting of their sin, as Paul warns them, or they can come under the direct discipline of God Himself. I can assure you that given the option, the prescribed discipline through the means that Christ has set up through His church, which includes other members of the body of Christ, particularly the leadership of the church, is far more desirable than to have God directly deal with the problem.

If I can use a human analogy it would be like mom trying to discipline the children and them not submitting to such discipline. In her frustration she throws up her arms and says.... (You know what she says). "Wait till your father gets home."

There are times when God's children will not humble themselves and will not take the counsel of God's word through His servants who love the sheep enough to give them such warnings when necessary.

And as we come to our text this morning we are going to witness such an event. Paul has been very patient with these Christians and has tried to encourage as well as exhort them. And now, after giving them what they need to hear, he is about to put the ball back in their court.

1CO 4:18-21 "Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. 19 But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. 20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 21 What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?"

Keep in mind that this is an apostle who has been given, not only the responsibility by Jesus Christ of leading the Church world-wide, but also the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish that task. When he wrote his second letter to them he points this out.

2CO 13:9-10 "We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection. 10 This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority - the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down."

Paul's authority is real and the power to accomplish God's will in that authority is real. But this authority is not limited to only apostles. An authority to lead the church is also given to God's leaders in His Pastors and elders. This is why he writes to Titus the way he does.

TIT 2:15 "These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you."

Paul gives similar instructions to Timothy when writing to him in the letter we know as 2Timothy.

2TI 4:1-2 "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction."

Along with preaching and encouraging, with great patience and careful instruction, Timothy is given the charge to also correct and rebuke. This is an authority to discipline in a church setting which is not shared with every person in the body of Christ.

This kind of authority is given only to those whom Christ chooses to shepherd His sheep. This doesn't make such a person any better than other Christians, it just means that our Lord has given a responsibility to certain individuals to use such authority to help His sheep stay on track to His glory.

And I'll be honest with you. This is an authority that sometimes makes me tremble in my boots because it is an authority and power from Jesus Christ Himself which is real, and is not to be abused for that very reason.

Unlike the gifts of the Spirit, which are shared with every member of the body of Christ, this authority, given to those who are placed as shepherds over that local body, include Pastors and elders. But, before we get ahead of ourselves on this issue, let's look at our immediate text.

1CO 4:18 "Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you."

Remember the context in which this accusation of being arrogant comes. Paul has been dealing with division, with quarreling, pride, worldliness, and immaturity in their walk with Christ. To hold to such attitudes necessarily involves an arrogance, to where they feel they are above any correction by someone like Paul.

The word arrogant in the Greek here in our text is a word which suggests to be puffed up. They were full of themselves as though they were their own authority and they were acting like little children who thumb their noses at bullies because now they're hiding behind their moms.

These little children are real tough when they think they can't be touched because of some obstacle which kept the bully away from them, namely mom. But the obstacle in the case of Paul was real.

In fact, it was about 900 miles. Keep in mind that when Paul was writing this letter he's in Ephesus.

It was on his second missionary journey that he planted this church in Corinth. His third missionary journey took him to Corinth which was his last stop on that journey before turning around and going to Jerusalem the same way in which he came.

Now, if Paul were going to only visit Corinth he could have hopped on a boat and sailed straight across the Aegean Sea from Ephesus to Corinth, which was about a 250 mile journey. But, these Corinthians knew that if Paul was going to see them they would be the last stop in a long journey because they knew Paul's pattern of visiting the churches he had previously planted.

And so, in their arrogance, hiding behind an obstacle of some 900 miles, they figured Paul wouldn't be seeing them again. But, like that bully who shouts across the yard to the kid behind his mom's skirt, "I'll be seeing you again when you're not with mom", Paul is going to assure these Corinthians that a little distance of 900 miles is not enough to keep him from seeing them again.

Now, I'm not suggesting that Paul is acting like a bully. That is the furthest thing from the truth. But, there may be something to these Corinthians seeing Paul as one who would rain on their parade if he came, having to submit to his authority given to him from Christ.

1CO 4:19 "But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have."

Paul knew that there were a few people in this congregation who were leading this church in a direction away from the truth of God's word. And evidently, they were influential enough to where the rest of the church couldn't or wouldn't discern such wrong teaching and attitudes.

Paul's concern, as a shepherd, is to protect the larger flock from such wolves. And though Paul is more often than not seen as a very mild mannered apostle, we should not confuse that with being weak. And essentially, what Paul is doing here is calling the hand of these people, who are arrogant, and saying, 'it's time to put up or shut up.'

If it's a matter of seeing whose power and authority will rise to the top Paul knows that Christ will assure that these arrogant ones will

not prosper. But notice too, that in assuring these Corinthians that he will see them soon, he also leaves room for God's timing in this matter.

If it were up to Paul, he may have been on the next boat and sailing straight across to Corinth. But, even in such important matters, he submits to God's timing in saying, if it is the Lord's will to see you very soon, I will.

This is an aspect of being a servant of the Lord which can be very frustrating, especially when circumstances are beyond our control. And this is where we simply have to trust that God is as concerned about such things as much as we are, and usually infinitely more.

Remember, this is Christ's church in Corinth. It's not Paul's. But Paul knows how this grieves his Master and Lord who purchased these people too. And so, he has to assume that if he can't deal with it immediately, in the way he feels he must, then he'll have to trust the One who purchased them and brought them into His kingdom.

But, at least at this point, Paul feels confident that he will eventually go to Corinth and deal with this matter personally as he confronts these arrogant ones in the authority and power of Jesus Christ.

Notice how he makes it a point to challenge the power of these people. "I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have."

What does he mean by this?

Well, the first thing Paul does here is to openly challenge these dissidents and their sin. And one of the main reasons for such a public challenge is because of the nature of the sin which, by this time, has affected the entire church and probably the entire area where this church is located.

You see, not only other Christians are affected by this sinful behavior, but also unbelievers who come into contact with these people. The pagans surrounding this church could very well get the wrong idea of who this Savior Jesus Christ is and what He expects of His people.

They are not representing our Lord properly, and believe me Jesus Christ loves His sheep too much to allow them to continue to dishonor Him.

But, as far as the power of these people is concerned, Paul is not intimating that they have any real power, but is actually calling them weak in the faith when they are confronted with the truth, because the power of the truth will ultimately prevail.

He mentions how these arrogant people are talking, or the way other translations put it, "I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power." (NASB)

Talk is cheap. But when exposed to the light of God's word, Paul will find out that the power these people profess to have will pale into insignificance. This is why we need never fear the truth of God's word when the world tries to discredit it or abuse it.

Keep in mind that this is God's word, not ours, and God ultimately doesn't need us to defend Him. He is the Almighty God who has all power and authority in heaven and earth. And yet, He allows His servants to be involved in the process of bringing this power to bear when needed.

And so, Paul knows that he is not standing on his own power or authority when writing to these people. He's acting as a representative of the One who will show His power to be real through Paul.

And so, in essence what Paul is doing here is warning these people that when he comes there will be discipline enacted, unless they are willing to repent in the meantime. And so, even in this warning, God is graciously giving these errant Corinthians time to stop what they're doing and get back to the teachings Paul brought them during that year and a half when he was with them.

And then in a show of power he assures them that God Himself, and the Kingdom which He has established, is bigger than any agenda these people may have.

1CO 4:20 "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power."

What Paul is saying here is that the big talk these arrogant one's are promoting is nothing compared to the reality of how God's kingdom is ruled. It is ruled from the throne of our Creator God.

Again, to contrast what is taking place in Corinth, Paul is accusing these people that they may have a form of godliness but they deny its power. And as he wrote Timothy these very words in his second

letter to him, he went on to say, "Have nothing to do with them." (2TI 3:5), in this case, these unrepentant professing believers.

Their words, their power, their authority is at best fleshly. But what are we told about the word of God?

HEB 4:12-13 "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Paul is counting on this aspect of God's word. You see, Paul has no intention of simply going to Corinth to give a display of power as he runs over these people. That's not his intention. As with any discipline it is meant to correct bad behavior, so the body of Christ, and individuals within the body, may get back on track and faithfully represent Christ.

That's Paul's heart in the matter. He doesn't want to be the heavy here. But he does want to impress upon these people that God is even more concerned with them and that He will not sit idly by as they hurt His sheep.

In his second letter to them, which apparently was before he actually met with them, Paul makes it clear that the last thing he wants to do is to demonstrate Christ's authority in discipline.

2CO 10:2 "I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world."

Paul's heart was to come to them and find them reconciled to Christ and one another so he could rejoice with them. Isn't that what we all desire? None of us wants a confrontation, especially as it relates to sin and the need for discipline. But, as I said earlier, if it was necessary, Paul was willing to do the will of God in this matter.

2CO 13:2-5 "... On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, 3 since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. 4 For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you. 5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test

yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you -unless, of course, you fail the test?"

Here Paul is leaving the test in the hands of these certain individuals who are not willing to submit to Christ. And what Paul is saying here is that if you are in Christ you are obliged to follow Christ. But if you're not willing to follow Christ it may be because you truly don't know him.

Examine yourselves, he says. And the examination starts with the word of God and then moves to the heart of the matter which is the heart of the people who are forced in this instance to consider their relationship, or lack thereof, with Christ.

Paul doesn't want them to be playing games with God by pretending to know Him when they don't, because it's a deadly game they will lose. It was deadly then and it's deadly today.

When people in this world look to the church as the one place where truth should reside and they find that many of these people, who claim to be Christians, are no different in their approach to life, then what signal does that send the world? What message does that send about a Savior who loves us unto death and yet tells us to take up our cross daily and follow Him as we die to self?

Paul was grieved over this because he knew it grieved the Holy Spirit. But he also knew he couldn't make that decision for them. He couldn't turn their hearts. They had to be willing to come to grips with their sin and repent and forsake it as they turned to Christ for forgiveness, who is more than willing to forgive.

1CO 4:21 "What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?"

It's not as though it was all the same to Paul. 'I can whip you or I can be gentle with you as you repent, it doesn't make any difference to me, you choose.' It did make a difference to Paul, as it makes a difference to every parent who desires that their children make the right choices because of their love for their parents, not simply because they're afraid of discipline.

And yet, we all know that sometimes discipline is the only way. And Paul realized this as well. And so, he poses the proposition with the understanding that whatever way they prefer God will deal with them.

What do you prefer?, is the question. It's a question that might seem to have an obvious response. After all, if the question was asked of most people in this world as to what they would prefer, heaven or hell, they would undoubtedly answer heaven if they were the least bit normal.

And yet, many of these same people will argue with you as to how you get there. And that's part of the same problem in Corinth. The obvious answer that Paul expects is that these people do not want the whip but the gentleness of Paul.

The problem arises with the pride of these people. We want the gentleness, but we want our way as well. Well, we can't have it both ways. We can't desire heaven and yet reject Christ any more than you can desire a peaceful relationship with Christ as a believer and yet walk in the ways of the world.

'At some point God has to get the attention of the offender because of His love for us', is what Paul is saying. So, which way to do you want it? It's an either/or proposition in this case, is Paul's point.

Now, when Paul makes the comment of coming with a whip he doesn't mean to suggest that he will physically accost these people. The point is that there may be severity to the punishment from a spiritual standpoint and that Paul has been given that spiritual authority to wield our Lord's discipline.

But again, as with all discipline, it is not meant to destroy but to build up.

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

Discipline is something all of us have had to deal with in one way or another. It may not be a formal church discipline, but if we're honest, we know when the Lord has had to get our attention when He speaks to our hearts. And that's the best place to resolve a problem before it gets so large that only church discipline is the next option.

That's what Paul is hoping and praying for. And as all of God's people recognize the need for God's touch, be that gentle or not, it should humble the true believer into seeking the face of our loving heavenly Father.

The writer of Hebrews hits it on the head as to how we view discipline but he also gives the proper perspective when it comes to what it should produce in our lives.

HEB 12:11-13 "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. 12 Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 13 "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed."

When Jesus extended His hand to the church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation He offered them the opportunity to repent and find His gentleness and love.

REV 3:19-22 "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. 21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

We often hear these verses in the context of Jesus knocking on the door of the heart of unbelievers during an evangelistic campaign as He stands there and asks to come into His Kingdom.

In Revelation 3 Jesus is actually speaking to believers who have strayed and need to repent. The beauty and comfort of this passage is found in the assurance that our Lord is always there to reestablish that fellowship that we walked away from.

But, we are instructed to open the door which is another way of saying we are the ones who need to repent and seek Him as He awaits with open arms.

1JO 2:1-2 "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the one who turns aside God's wrath, taking away our sins, and not only ours but also the sins of the whole world."

This is Paul's message to the Corinthians and it's the message for God's people today. Praise God we have such a Savior. And praise God that we don't have to live in a world where sin characterizes our lives; but rather through a relationship with the living God through faith in Christ, we can show our thankfulness

and appreciation with lives of love and obedience to our new Lord and Master.