

Challenges Christians Face

Like Father, Like Children

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

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Like Father, Like Children

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is knowing the characteristics of a spiritual father. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Like Father, Like Children."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 4:14-21:

¹⁴ I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? (1 Corinthians 4:14-21)

Introduction

Several years ago the TV show *60 Minutes* ran a segment that tells us something important about fatherlessness.

The park rangers at a South African wildlife preserve were concerned about the slaughter of 39 rare white rhinos in their park. It turned out that the rhinos were killed not by poachers but rather by juvenile delinquents—teen elephants.

The story began a decade earlier when the park could no longer sustain the increasing population of elephants. They decided

to kill many of the adult elephants whose young were old enough to survive without them. And so, the young elephants grew up fatherless.

As time went on, many of these young elephants roamed together in gangs and began to do things elephants normally don't do. They threw sticks and water at rhinos and acted like neighborhood bullies. Without dominant males, the young bulls became sexually active, producing excessive testosterone and exhibiting aggressive behavior. A few young males grew especially violent, knocking down rhinos and stepping or kneeling on them, crushing the life out of them. Mafuto, the gang leader, eventually had to be killed.

The park rangers theorized that these young teen-aged elephants were acting badly because they lacked role models. The solution was to bring in a large male to lead them and to counteract their bully behaviors. Soon the new male established dominance and put the young bulls in their places. The killing stopped. The young males were mentored—and saved.¹

The presence, participation, and power of a father cannot be overestimated. It is reported that:

- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes (Source: U.S. D.H.H.S., Bureau of the Census)
- 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes
- 80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes (Source: Criminal Justice & Behavior, Vol. 14, pp. 403-26, 1978)
- 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions come from fatherless homes (Source: U.S. Dept. of Justice, Special Report, Sept. 1988)
- 85% of all youths sitting in prisons grew up in a fatherless home (Source: Fulton Co. Georgia jail populations, Texas Dept. of Corrections, 1992)²

¹ *60 Minutes*, (1-20-99).

² See http://www.photius.com/feminocracy/facts_on_fatherless_kids.html.

And what is true in the natural realm is also true in the spiritual realm. Christians are profoundly shaped and influenced by godly spiritual parenting.

The apostle Paul was keenly aware of that truth when he wrote to the Corinthians. They had slipped into various kinds of errors. He was rebuking the Corinthians because he loved them as a father loves his children.

In today's passage Paul focused their attention on six characteristics of a faithful spiritual father. He teaches them the key elements in a vital and effective discipleship relationship. They are not in chronological order, but these are the essential elements.

Lesson

And so, in today's lesson we learn about the characteristics of a spiritual father.

Let's use the following outline³ for today's lesson:

1. A Spiritual Father Admonishes His Spiritual Children (4:14a)
2. A Spiritual Father Loves His Spiritual Children (4:14b)
3. A Spiritual Father Begets His Spiritual Children (4:15)
4. A Spiritual Father Sets and Example for His Spiritual Children (4:16-17a)
5. A Spiritual Father Teaches His Spiritual Children (4:17b)
6. A Spiritual Father Disciplines His Spiritual Children (4:18-21)

I. A Spiritual Father Admonishes His Spiritual Children (4:14a)

First, a spiritual father admonishes his spiritual children.

Paul said in verse 14a, **“I do not write these things to make**

³ This outline is taken from John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 113-120.

you ashamed, but to admonish you. . . .”

Paul wrote to the Corinthians because they had slipped into all kinds of errors. They favored one preacher over another. They misunderstood the gospel. And they challenged Paul’s authority.

So he wrote to them not to make them **ashamed** (he would leave that to their own consciences) but rather to **admonish** them. He needed to reprove and correct them because of their error.

Christian businessman and author John D. Beckett shares the following personal story about the power of admonition:

I was in a dental chair being prepped for the replacement of a filling. Just as my mouth was filled with dental hardware so I could only mumble, the dental technician said, out of the blue, “You’re Mr. Beckett, aren’t you?” I grunted assent.

“Well, I want to thank you for firing my husband.”

I was stuck. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. I could only listen to the ensuing monologue.

“It happened ten years ago,” she said. “A few days after your company hired my husband, he was notified he had failed a drug test. You may not recall,” she continued, “but you called him into your office before he left. You said, ‘I realize I don’t have any choice but to terminate you, but I want to tell you something. You’re at a crossroads. You can keep going the way you are, and the results are very predictable. Or you can take this as a wake-up call. You can decide you’re going to turn your life around.’”

I’m sure the technician couldn’t see the beads of perspiration on my forehead under all the paraphernalia as she continued: “I want you to know, my husband took your advice. Today, he’s a good father, a good husband, and he has a fine job. Thank you for firing my husband!”

I wish I could say that all our terminations have turned out this way. . . . Regardless of the outcome, however, we must be prepared to take action when a situation can’t be brought around. In a strange way, it’s an aspect of our care for people.⁴

One of the characteristics of a spiritual father is that he admonishes his spiritual children when they are wrong.

⁴ John D. Beckett, *Mastering Monday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 157-158.

II. A Spiritual Father Loves His Spiritual Children (4:14b)

Second, a spiritual father loves his spiritual children.

Paul said in verse 14b, “. . . as **my beloved children.**”

Paul really loved his spiritual children. Pastor John MacArthur says that “**‘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.”⁵

Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, the real-life couple portrayed in the movie *Blindside*, share the following story in their book *In a Heartbeat*:

There is a little-known congressional program that awards internships to young people who have aged out of the foster care system. These are kids who were never adopted, and are no longer eligible for state support.

[A senator we’ve met] employed one such man as an intern. One morning the senator breezed in for a meeting and discovered that his intern was already in the office, reorganizing the entire mailroom. The senator said to the intern, “This is amazing—the mailroom has never looked so clean. You did a great job.”

A few minutes later the senator saw that the intern had tears streaming down his face. [He] said, “Son, are you okay?”

“Yes,” the intern answered quietly.

“Did I say something to offend you?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, what’s wrong?”

The young man said, “That’s the first time in my life anyone’s told me that I did something good.”

The Tuohy’s comment, “A little bit of attention and a kind word—that’s how little it takes to affect someone’s life for the better.”⁶

⁵ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 115.

⁶ *Men of Integrity*, “How Little It Takes,” (November/December 2010).

Guy Doud was the National Teacher of the Year in 1986. He is a committed Christian and passionate about teaching children with love. He was the first one I heard use the expression, “They will never care how much you know until they know how much you care.” That statement is even truer in the spiritual realm.

So, a spiritual father loves his spiritual children.

III. A Spiritual Father Begets His Spiritual Children (4:15)

Third, a spiritual father begets his spiritual children.

Paul said in verse 15, **“For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”**

The believers in Corinth became Christians through the ministry of Paul. And even though they had **countless guides in Christ**, they only had one spiritual father—Paul. That is why he said, **“For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”**

Think of the person who led you to Christ. It may have been a parent. It may have been a friend. It may have been a co-worker. And even though you may have had many other teachers since your conversion to Christ, you only have one person who **became your spiritual father in Christ Jesus through the gospel**. You will always think fondly and gratefully of the person who led you to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Let me encourage you to express your thanks to the person who introduced you to Jesus Christ.

IV. A Spiritual Father Sets an Example for His Spiritual Children (4:16-17a)

Fourth, a spiritual father sets an example for his spiritual children.

Paul said in verses 16-17a, **“I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ. . . .”**

A significant part of discipleship is imitation, just as a significant part of a parent's teaching is imitation.

I remember my wife Eileen recalling things she was saying to our children which she later realized were things she remembered hearing her mother say to her! Imitation is extremely powerful.

Timothy Dalrymple, editor of Patheos.com, was the NCAA's top-ranked gymnast as a sophomore at Stanford until a broken neck ended his career. In God's providence, that disaster opened up opportunities for him to deepen his faith and also earn a Ph.D. at Harvard University.

While lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling, Timothy had plenty of time to think.

He says that "even as a child I had a philosophical bent and spent a lot of time thinking about all sorts of ultimate questions, especially the question of whether there is some sort of existence beyond death. I don't know which one I found more terrifying, that there would be some existence or that there would not."

Yet, when asked what helped him to grow in his faith, philosophical questions gave way to a relationship and an example.

"The example of my father," Dalrymple replied, "not only a pastor but a genuinely loving, faithful, righteous person, helped. I saw in his life something undeniably true that I couldn't explain away."⁷

A spiritual father sets an example for his spiritual children.

V. A Spiritual Father Teaches His Spiritual Children (4:17b)

Fifth, a spiritual father teaches his spiritual children.

Paul said in verse 17b, "**. . . as I teach them everywhere in every church.**"

Imagine you are in the grocery store. You see a pleasant-looking couple who appear to be a bit lost. You go over to them and introduce yourself to them. They are looking for some bread, and you take them over to the bread aisle. While you are walking,

⁷ Marvin Olasky, "Rising from a Fall," *World* (3-12-11).

you strike up a conversation. You discover that they are from Inner Mongolia. They are students at USF, and are about to graduate and go back to Mongolia. You invite them to church. They accept your invitation, and sit with you the next Sunday. They are so struck by the message that afterwards they ask you how to become a Christian. And so you lead them to faith in Christ. They are leaving Tampa later that week, and they ask you what they should do now.

What do you say to them?

Do you say to them, “Oh, don’t worry about it. You’ll figure out the Christian life”?

No. That’s absurd. You have to figure out a way to teach them how to live as a Christian.

Edward Kimball is probably not known to you. He lived over a hundred years ago. He was a Sunday school teacher in Boston, where a young teenager became part of his class. The young man was a country boy. He didn’t know the ways of the city or of the church. But he came to Kimball’s Sunday school class.

When the teen first came to his class, Edward Kimball handed him a Bible. When Mr. Kimball said, “Turn to the Gospel of John,” the country boy didn’t know how to find the Gospel of John. Edward Kimball recognized what was happening, and while the other boys were snickering, he opened the Bible to the Gospel of John and handed it back. When he asked the boys to read, the country boy fumbled as he read.

But Edward Kimball had a big perspective, and he saw possibilities in the boy. Kimball worked with him, and after some months he went down to the store where the boy was working, went into the back room where he was stacking boxes, and led the boy to Jesus Christ. That was the conversion of D. L. Moody, who became one of America’s great preachers in the late 19th century.

You didn’t know Edward Kimball, an obscure Sunday school teacher who had a vision. But he understood the importance of teaching his spiritual children.⁸

⁸ Gordon Johnson, "Finding Significance in Obscurity," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 82.

VI. A Spiritual Father Disciplines His Spiritual Children (4:18-21)

And sixth, a spiritual father disciplines his spiritual children.

Paul said in verses 18-21, **“Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?”**

There are times when natural fathers have to discipline their children. Discipline is in fact an expression of love. It is given to correct wrong thinking or action.

In the same way, a spiritual father disciplines his spiritual children. Paul did that with the Corinthian believers because they had slipped into wrong thinking, which then led to wrong behavior.

In fact, **some** of the Corinthian believers had become **arrogant**, believing that they could think and act as they wanted, thinking that Paul would not come to them.

But Paul assured them that he would **come** to them **soon**, if **the Lord** willed. And then, when he came he would **find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power**. The problem in Corinth was that many of the Christians thought they had arrived at true wisdom, which they mistakenly thought was more powerful than the gospel.

Paul then stated a central principle of great importance. He said, **“For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.”** In other words, faith that does not result in right living may have many words to support it, but it will have no power. As John MacArthur says, “A person’s true spiritual character is not determined by the impressiveness of his words but by the power of his life (cf. Matthew 7:21-23).”⁹

And so Paul gave the Corinthians a choice. He said, **“What**

⁹ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 120.

do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” He hoped that they would repent so that he would not have to come with a rod but rather with love in a spirit of gentleness. Nevertheless, if he needed to, he would discipline his spiritual children.

So, a spiritual father disciplines his spiritual children.

Conclusion

Charlie Engle, Ray Zahab, and Kevin Lin know endurance better than most. For 111 days, they ran the equivalent of two marathons a day in order to cross the entire Sahara Desert on foot. They touched the waters at Senegal and then made their way through Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya, and Egypt to touch the waters of the Red Sea. Along the way, the trio faced blazing afternoons of over 100 degrees, jarring, freezing nights, sandstorms, tendonitis, violent sickness, and the usual aches, pains, and blisters. But the biggest challenge they faced can be summed up in one word: water. Finding it in its purest, cleanest form gets to be a bit of a chore while in the middle of nowhere!¹⁰

Crossing the Saharan Desert on foot is an amazing accomplishment. But just as commendable are these marathon finishers:

- Christians who finish their lives still learning and still growing, and
- Spiritual fathers who admonish, love, beget, set an example, teach, and discipline their spiritual children.

In these words in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we learn about six characteristics of a faithful spiritual father. These are the key elements in a vital and effective discipleship relationship. Amen.

¹⁰ Anna Johnson, “3ultra-athletes run across Sahara,” *USA Today* (2-20-07).

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, the apostle Paul teaches us about six characteristics of a faithful spiritual father, which are the key elements in a vital and effective discipleship relationship. I pray that every Christian here today would be actively participating in a discipling relationship where these elements are producing spiritual growth and transformation.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, go and become the spiritual children that our heavenly father calls us to be!