

Sermon 14: 1 Corinthians 4:14-21: Paul, a Spiritual Father

OUTLINE

A father's admonition
A father's love
A father's example
A father's instruction
A father's discipline

INTRODUCTION

We are experiencing a fatherhood crisis in the world today. NZ is has one of the highest rates of single parent homes where 1 in 4 children are born into a single parent situation. Compared to all the countries in the EU, we come in second only outdone by Lithuania. Nearly nine out of ten times, the father is absent. Family first writes, 'An abundance of research into the effects of fatherlessness reveal some deeply troubling consequences. When a child is raised in a fatherless home, they are negatively affected in the following ways:

4x greater risk of poverty
More likely to have behavioural problems
2x greater risk of infant mortality
More likely to go to prison
More likely to commit crime
7x more likely to become pregnant as a teen
More likely to face abuse and neglect
More likely to abuse drugs and alcohol
2x more likely to suffer obesity
2x more likely to drop out of school.'¹

God is a Father and has made the institution of fatherhood to reflect His goodness, and is situated to bring His good gifts into the life of the family, the gifts of love, protection, provision, instruction, discipline, etc. Fatherhood is a great gift to this world, so many good things come through it, and the loss of it is deeply felt. In the text before us, 1 Corinthians 4:14-21, Paul presents himself as a spiritual father to the Corinthians and he puts on display some of the characteristics of a good father. The Corinthians we have said fit well into the idea of the willful child who has stopped listening to its parents, who have made others in their lives their authorities, whose values they are adopting, whose ways they are imitating. Paul has been saying some hard things, and there will be more hard things to follow, but we have a wonderful moment here where Paul shows his heart, as a father to a child, seeking to win them back from their folly and waywardness. We have 5 aspects of fatherhood in the text before us, a father's admonitions; a father's love; a father's example; a father's instruction; and a father's discipline.

A father's admonition

V14, 'I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.' A major idea from Roman culture that feeds into what Paul is saying here is the difference between a father, and the tutor which was a slave teacher who often took the role of the disciplinarian. The son of a good

¹ <https://familyfirst.org.nz/2022/09/02/why-we-need-to-support-and-encourage-fatherhood/> accessed 5/2/2024

house would be put under the supervision of a pedagogoi, a slave who acted as chaperone and teacher, Paul uses that word where it is translated as 'guides' in v15. It would be their job to walk the son to school and back, to protect them from bullies and keep them out of trouble, they would give them some instruction, and they would also be the ones who took the leading role in applying the rod, corporal punishment. The ancient world is full of pictures and caricatures of the heavy handed and dim witted tutor. Paul seems to be positioning himself in the place of the loving father over against the role of the harsh disciplinarian.

The first aspect of Paul's fatherly action is his admonishing them, and his desire not to shame them. The word admonish/exhort is a form of address that is addressing something wrong and trying to put it right, it is the mode of reproof and correction. Some fathers are silent and do not speak up about the wrong in their children's behavior or attitude and they sin in passively leaving things to go unaddressed. Admonition is a critical aspect of parenting as we correct, exhort, admonish, reprove our children. If this is the only way of addressing your children and not adding encouragement, tender speech, kind words, praise, affirmations of love, then your parenting will be all thunderstorms and no sunshine. Some parents are prone to having a constant tenor of correction in their speech and this will have a hardening effect, of developing resentment. This is probably part of what lies behind Paul's warning to fathers in Eph. 6:4, 'Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.' Although admonition is essential to parenting because we parent sinners, an atmosphere of faultfinding, of loud verbal shaming, of a constant and harassing nagging is counterproductive.

Paul is aware that we don't always deal well with criticism, some harden themselves as a kind of armour, some take the criticism too hard and fall apart in shame. Paul seeks to show that he is not merely ranting and getting some relief from his anger and disappointment, but seeks their good by opening with the words, 'I do not write these things to shame you.' Paul has had to say some very hard things, he has had to point out some bad and self-destructive things the Corinthians are doing. Paul does not enjoy having to speak publicly about their short fallings for 3 chapters; he has not enjoyed having to resort to sarcasm, or having to rally scriptures highlighting that the Corinthians are against the general teaching of God's word. Paul has had to humble them because they have stopped glorifying God and are glorifying man, because they are harming the church and themselves, but he does not seek to destroy them in this correction process. Paul recognizes that there is a proper place for someone to feel bad, and feel ashamed that they might change, 2 Thess. 3:14, 'If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.' Tit. 2:8, 'and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.'

I think we need to learn this balance of addressing sin but not ripping apart the person who needs correction. We live in an age where love is defined as 'unconditional positive regard.' This is one of the big ideas that is absolutely tearing our society apart. Think about it, a parent, a teacher, a Christian if they are to fulfil this modern definition of loving is not allowed to offer correction but only unconditional positive regard. So if your child comes to you and says 'Dad, I am gay.' Our response has to be unconditional positive regard. 'Dad, I identify as transgender,' unconditional positive regard. 'Dad, I identify as a cat,'

unconditional positive regard. This is folly, like Paul we must constructively correct not giving up on the gospel, not giving up on truth, on giving up on what is a sin and what is not, not giving up on seeing God glorified in all things.

A father's love

The second aspect of Paul's father way is seen in v14 in those words, 'beloved children.' Paul is having to wear the disciplinarian's hat but he makes sure that there is sugar in his medicine and reassures the Corinthians of his love for them. Parents love their children. Evolution teaches us that love is nature's chemical trick to make us think we love our offspring so that we will provide for them and ensure the survival of our DNA. No, we love because God is love and we are made in His image. Parental love is a reflection of God's love for us, Ps. 103:13, 'As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.' This comparison between our love and God's love is used by Christ, Luke 11:13, 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'" God's Fatherhood is similar but superior to our own. Parental love then has a mandate from the fact that God is a loving Father, as well as a model in God's own love. This would include physical provision as well as affection.

Does your child feel your love and affection? Warm smiles, times of fun and play, a friendly reception, praise, physical touch, words of affection like Paul is doing here. Even as he has to be stern he tempers his sternness with reaffirmations of love and acceptance. Paul's fatherly love here is much like God's fatherly love to us in the gospel, and casts a mold for how we should show fatherly love. When you become a Christian you were adopted, you still sin, and God as a Father will discipline you though never condemn you, for there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. When He disciplines you it is as a Father, He never disciplines His children in such a way that they should fear they are not, He does not threaten you will be orphans once again. Any threats of damnation to those who walk away are for those who were never His, once you are His sheep nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And so He deals with our sin but there is gentleness there, He remembers that we are dust, a bruised reed He will not break, a smouldering wick He does not snuff out. Paul is using this same idea of holiness and affection together as we should in our own parenting as well. We will never do it perfectly, but we must ensure that our children know that we love them.

A father's example

V15-16, '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.' Paul has been particularly pointed with the Corinthians but that is because he is peculiarly their spiritual father through the gospel. This is one of the glories of the gospel. Not all are able to marry and multiply, but we can be wed to Christ and bear spiritual children by the gospel. Even for those parents who are believers, there is no greater thing than that their children be also born again and be spiritual children in the gospel.

Here Paul draws strongly on that slave teacher versus father idea. He is not one of those mere guides who cannot love their charges as a parent does their

children. He is also drawing strongly on the expectation that a son would imitate his father. In the ancient world if your father was a mason, you would apprentice with him and become a mason. If your father was a loyal servant of a particular Lord, you too would go on to serve the same Lord. Here Paul says something that is both daunting to say, and yet which we should seek to be able to say, 'imitate me.'

They say that when it comes to children more is caught than taught; that when they grow up they will end up doing what you did not as you said. This brings our attention then to our own conduct as parents. Are hypocrites who say one thing, while doing another. I grew up in a home where I was told by my parents, not to smoke, not to get drunk and not to do drugs, my parents did all three, I ended up doing as they did not what they said. The Corinthians have given into peer pressure; they have become like those outside the family of faith. They have taken on their values, their ways, what they think is important and true, and they dress, talk, listen to the same music, respect the same famous people as their friends do. Paul has been dressing them down, and calls them back to truth and back to the family, and back to following his example.

In our last message we saw the example that Paul set, he laid it out clearly in v9-12, 'For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.' To imitate Paul means giving up what the world says is wisdom for what God says is wisdom. It means to give up on worldly approval and acceptance because they don't like or agree with what the truth is. To imitate Paul means to give up friends and circles that live by lies, who reject the truth, and who will reject you for believing it. To imitate Paul means becoming a servant of all men. Of laying down your life, of putting others' need before your own. To imitate Paul is to live a cross-shaped life in service of the salvation of others. Where like Christ you give your life if necessary to the one who is killing you as you give them the gospel that alone can save them. Imitate Paul in enduring difficulties, of going without, of doing hard things so others can benefit, of living a life characterized as becoming poor that others may become rich.

Can you call your children to imitate you as you imitate Christ? Can you say to your children, I love my spouse well, love your spouse like I do? Or, I am a good steward of the money God has given me, use your money like I do? Or, I am a good model of commitment to using my gifts in serving in the local church, do as I do? As your children watch how much you read your bible, as they listen to your prayers and watch whether you take all things to God in prayer, is this an area you can say, 'imitate me.' How you speak about other people, the attitude you have towards your work, how you lose graciously, how you say sorry, these are all things your children will learn from you. There are many areas we can drill down into on this matter because there are a lot of areas where we are weak, but let me emphasize one, how we use our smartphones today. I was recently reading a book review of a new and controversial book. It is called *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. It is written by a non-Christian Jonathan Haidt. One reviewer

writes, 'Jonathan Haidt has done the difficult work of proving what Big Tech has been denying: that their products, smartphones and social media, are killing our children. Haidt proves both that there is a problem--there is, in fact, a teen mental health crisis—and that the cause of the crisis is the phone-based childhood ushered in by smartphones and their social media apps.

Haidt identifies four foundational harms of the phone-based childhood: social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction. He notes that while girls are more susceptible to harm from social media and boys suffer more from unrelenting exposure to pornography and video games, both stories end up in the same place: Boys and girls today believe that their lives are meaningless. Haidt explains that social media, online pornography, and video games have all pulled children out of real-world communities and into rapidly shifting virtual networks that result in anomie, or normlessness, and anomie breeds despair.

... He also shares a backstory of the decline of play-based childhood well before the existence of smartphones and social media. This clear picture of normal childhood development and the vital need for risky, independent play illuminates, with disturbing clarity, the developmentally impoverished childhood that smartphones have created. Haidt rightly calls smartphones "experience blockers" because they deprive children of those experiences they must have in order to progress to adulthood.' Childhood is being stolen by technology today, parents have to think hard about how they are going to protect their children from this new digital threat. Apart from looking at the home environment and decluttering the home of unnecessary and excessive smartphone use, and making it a practice of waiting until children are older rather than younger before they get a smartphone. The big question I have for you today is, can your children imitate your smartphone use? Are you modelling thinking upon things good, clean and pure; or is it materialism, lust, gossip, violence, mindless time wasting garbage that fills your time?

A father's instruction

V17, '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.' Given the difficult nature of things in Corinth Paul was sending Timothy. Timothy was a faithful child who Paul was sending to remind the Corinthians of the things he teaches in every church. A father teaches his children. Paul would teach the gospel first and foremost about a God who is holy, what man is as a sinner, that God is good and a Saviour who send Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sins; that salvation is through faith in Him. Paul taught these truths with tears beseeching sinners to turn to God and so should we with our children. Paul teaches everywhere how the child of God now lives a new life which is one of fellowship with his brethren in Christ, which is holy, which observes God's law about sexuality, marriage, childrearing, loving one's neighbour, being a good citizen, being humble and not returning evil for evil. Paul is not content with saying these things once, but sends Timothy to remind them again. Timothy a living embodiment of these truths will both teach and live them as well.

A father does as Paul says, Eph. 6:4, 'Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.' The instruction of the Lord. A father takes his children to church to be instructed; a father makes sure his children have their own copy of the bible and that they read it; a father has family devotions and catechizes his children in the proper beliefs and practices of Christianity. We are saved in being taught the truth; we

are sanctified through the same teaching of the truth, a father is not only a breadwinner and disciplinarian but a teacher in the home.

A father's discipline

V18-21, '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?' Paul is protective of his family like any father, and here like a shepherd he promises to come with a rod if necessary. He wants nothing more than to be able to help those who repent of their folly in dividing the church in a spirit of gentleness. Paul has a heart for restoring sinners not destroying them, Gal. 6:1-2, 'Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.' However, if those who are disturbing the peace of the church will continue to talk big then Paul promises to come with a rod of discipline to set things straight. He says that he will come to test the power of their words for many talk about having the truth, but gospel has the power to save and to sanctify, the power of the gospel will be evident in the changed lives of those who are truly saved. Perhaps he will even have to apply the rod of church discipline.

Here Paul demonstrates the hard but necessary part of discipline that every father must embrace. Not all discipline involves the rod, though the bible does permit it. Prov. 13:24, 'Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.' the bible emphasizes sons receiving the rod. There are many ways to confront sin, correct behavior and teach about rewards and punishments. Prov. 17:10, 'A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.' Neither the rod nor rebuke should be done with violence, anger, intimidation, in a demeaning fashion, or in a way that makes a child feel unsafe. God reproves us in love and this is how parents who are God's representatives are to do it as well. Gene Edward Veith wrote in World magazine: 'Not only the ACLU but also many educators, child psychologists and even parents subscribe to the 'expressive' theory of mental health. According to this model, human beings, deep down, are basically good. They simply need to express their feelings they have inside. Obstacles to this expression—such as 'society rules,' 'oppressive' authority figures, and 'judgemental' belief systems—cause repression and thus mental unhappiness and twisted behaviour. Under this worldview, any attempt to control or punish or suppress the feelings of a child is construed as cruel. And disciplining a child becomes next to impossible.... For all the attempts to discipline children through 'positive reinforcement' and such non-painful methods as 'time outs' and guilt trips, young people are learning that since adults will not exert force against them, they can pretty much ignore those in authority.... Allowing children to grow up without discipline—however kindly it appears on the surface—is child abuse, an expression of our culture's hatred for children.'

The goal of discipline is not to punish the child for the inconvenience they have caused you or to take in damages the perceived damage they have caused, it is always restoration to God and His ways. It is a mini judgement that reinforces our sinfulness, the holiness of God who will punish sin, and should be followed up with the truth that God forgives sin in Christ. There is a lot more that could be

said on this matter but hopefully we have said enough to establish that loving correction is a mark of godly parenting.