

Listen to Your Daddy

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

Introduction: The Bible speaks a lot to the wisdom of listening to our father, our daddy. Just a sampling from Proverbs makes this crystal clear:

- 1) Proverbs 1:8: “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction, and don’t reject your mother’s teaching.
- 2) Proverbs 2:1-5: “My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, listening closely to wisdom and directing your heart to understanding; furthermore, if you call out to insight and lift your voice to understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it like hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God.”
- 3) Proverbs 3:1-2: “My son, don’t forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commands; for they will bring you many days, a full life, and well-being.”
- 4) Proverbs 4:1-2: “Listen, my sons, to a father’s discipline, and pay attention so that you may gain understanding, for I am giving you good instruction.”
- 5) Proverbs 6:20-22: “My son, keep your father’s command, and don’t reject your mother’s teaching. Always bind them to your heart; tie them around

your neck. When you walk here and there, they will guide you; when you lie down, they will watch over you; when you wake up, they will talk to you.”

6) Proverbs 23:22: “Listen to your father who gave you life.”

I wonder if Paul may have had this biblical theme and these Proverbs in his mind when he penned the words of our text. Eva Lassen points out, “For Paul, the use of the father-image seems to have been a fundamental one for expressing his relationship to congregations, which he had founded...” In using it, “he is invoking an authoritative relationship over the congregation as its founding father...” (Tyndale Bulletin 42.1 (1991), 127, 136). The call for church unity that began in 1:10 now reaches its conclusion (4:21). Here Paul exposes his heart and bares his soul. You are my children because “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (4:15). What I am about to write comes from the heart of a father. Listen to your daddy! I only want God’s best for you.

Four truths are located in these verses that should inform any and every spiritual relationship between spiritual fathers and their spiritual children.

I. Spiritual fathers have a unique relationship with their children 4:14-15

Paul's words in 4:8-13 were ironic and sarcastic. They were sharp and cutting. Now they are tender and personal. A good minister recognizes the value of both. The key is what to say and when to say it. As Paul closes this section (1:10-4:21) and prepares to tackle several difficult issues (chs. 5-6), he wants to place all that he says in the context of the father-child relationship that exist between himself and the church at Corinth.

1) They care for us 4:14

Paul wants the church to know his tough words (vv. 8-13) flow out of a tender heart, a heart of love and concern. He did not write to “shame” them (*ESV*, “make you ashamed”), “but to warn (*ESV*, “admonish”) you as my dear children.” The verse literally begins “not shaming you I write.” This allows him to emphasize the point that his goal is not to put them to shame. Rather, he wants to warn those he sees as precious and “dear (*ESV*, “beloved”) children.” This is a daddy talking to his sons and daughters. His concerns are parental, relational. He will correct their immature behavior, but he will do so with tender care and encouragement. The paraphrase of the *Message* is too good to pass over: “I’m not writing all this as a neighborhood scold just to make you feel rotten. I’m writing as a father to you, my children. I love you and want you to grow up well, not spoiled.”

2) They gave us birth

4:16

Paul's firm but tender care for the Corinthians is not difficult to understand. It is quite natural (or supernatural). He and he alone was used by Christ, by means of the gospel, to bring about their spiritual birth, their conversion. "For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Paul planted the church in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17). He is, on the human plane, their spiritual daddy. In God's providence he has a special relationship with and authority over the Corinthians.

Now, this does not negate the fact that God has used others (like Apollos, Peter, Aquila, Priscilla, Silas and Timothy) to bless and nurture them.

Paul gladly acknowledges, "For you have countless instructors, (*ESV*, "countless guides; *NIV*, "ten thousand guardians") in Christ, but you don't have many fathers." Fee notes Paul uses "unusually hyperbolic language: "Even though you *may end up* having *countless thousands* of guardians in Christ, *at least* you do not have many fathers"" (*1 Cor.*

NICNT, 201). The word "instructors" or "guardian" is the Greek word *paidagogōs*. Again, Fee's comments are very helpful at this point: "The "guardian," to be distinguished from a "teacher," was ordinarily a trusted slave to whom a father turned over his children (usually sons), whom the guardian was to conduct to and from school and whose conduct in

general he was to oversee. This is not intended to be a putdown of their other teachers, of whom Paul has thus far spoken favorably. Rather, the metaphor intends simply to distinguish his own relationship to them from that of all others, including of course Apollos and Peter. But it also includes those within their community who are currently exercising influence, not to mention all others who ever would. Paul's unique relationship to them was that of a "father," and that gave him a special authority over and responsibility toward them. With this language, therefore, he is both reasserting his authority and appealing to their loyalty, which had obviously eroded in this church." (201-202).

Fathers should be viewed in a special way in our natural family. They should be viewed in a special way in our spiritual family too. Others are important in our growth and instruction, but no one can take the place of our father. Paul brought the Corinthians the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. He spent time nurturing them and loving them. No one else did for them what he did. They should never forget that.

II. Spiritual fathers provide an example to follow

4:16-17

In 3 John 11 the apostle writes, "Dear friend [Gaius], do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God, the one who does evil has not seen God." The Bible often refers to the wisdom of following and

imitating good, godly examples. The importance of finding worthy role models is biblical and it is wise. To 3 John 11 we can add:

- Ephesians 5:1: “Be imitators of God, as dearly loved children.”
- Philippians 2:5: “Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus.”
- 1 Peter 2:21: “For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”
- 1 Peter 5:2-3: “Shepherd God’s flock among you...not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to God’s flock.”

Paul will draw upon this biblical pattern twice in 1 Corinthians (4:16; 11:1).

Here, he will tie it to his father-child relationship with the Corinthians. Like father like son we might say!

1) We imitate them 4:16

“Therefore, I urge you to imitate me.” The word urge is *parakalō*. It means to urge, beg (*GNT*) or encourage (*NET*). It is the word picture of coming up along someone, putting your arm around them in friendly embrace, and encouraging them. Paul’s encouragement to his spiritual children: “imitate me.” Imitate is *mimetai* from which we get our word mimic. Schreiner notes, “In context, the imitation centres on Paul’s suffering as an apostle (4:9-13).” [*1 Cor., TNTC, 105*]. I would agree with this, though I would not limit it only to the sufferings of the apostle.

Paul has provided a pattern of life worthy of emulation because his role model is Christ! Calvin argues, “But to what extent he wishes them to be imitators of him, he shows elsewhere, when he adds, as he was of Christ (1 Cor. xi. 1). This limitation must always be observed, so as not to follow any man, except so far as he leads us to Christ” (*1 Cor.*, 173). I like Carson’s simple summation, “what Paul wants them to imitate is his passion to live life in the light of the cross” (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 110).

2) We follow their teaching 4:17

In addition to the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul has also sent Timothy to the church. We do not know whether Timothy or the letter arrived first. Concerning Timothy, Schreiner writes, “Timothy frequently travelled with Paul as he journeyed and proclaimed the gospel (Acts 16:1; 17:14-15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4). Timothy was also present when the gospel was proclaimed to the Corinthians (Acts 18:5; 2 Cor. 1:19). He was a valued and trusted co-worker of Paul’s (see esp. Phil. 2:19-24; cf. also Rom. 16:21; 1 Thess. 3:2) and was particularly beloved by Paul (1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:2-5). We see from 1 Corinthians 16:10-11 that Paul anticipates Timothy visiting the Corinthians.” (p. 105).

Acts 16:1 informs us that Timothy's mother was a Jewish believer but his father an unbelieving Greek. Paul notes that he and Timothy also have a father-son relationship. "He is my dearly loved and faithful child in the Lord." Because Paul trust him, he sent Timothy who "will remind you about my ways in Christ Jesus, just as I teach everywhere in the church." Timothy will call to their remembrance Paul's life of faithfulness and integrity which had been on display before them for 18 months when he planted the church. Further, they should know that not only is Paul's life one of faithful consistency, so is his teaching. Paul does not teach one thing at this church and something different at another church. Wiersbe is right, "God does not have one standard for one church and a different standard for another church. He may work out His will in different ways (Phil. 2:12-13), but the basic doctrines and principles are the same" (*Be Wise*, 69). Paul was the same man with the same message in Galiata, at Thessalonica, at Corinth and everywhere else. Their was a remarkable consistency to his message and methods. How desperately we need men and women like that today.

III. Spiritual fathers confront us when we sin

4:18-19

A father and mother who loves well their children will not look the other way when they disobey and misbehave. Because they love them, they will

discipline them (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:20-21; see also Prov. 13:24; 22:6; 29:15).

This parental pattern in the home is once again followed in the church as Paul now begins to demonstrate the tough love that he must with the Corinthians.

He began with a gentle hand, but now the rod of discipline is threatened if they do not respond to his gracious appeal.

1) They confront our sinful attitudes 4:18

Apparently there is a small but vocal group stirring things up at Corinth.

Some things in the church never change! They were arrogantly claiming that Paul said he was coming to see them but that he will never show up.

Paul called them out for their arrogance in 4:6 and does so again here. A heart of pride and a spirit of arrogance often go hand in hand. This

superiority complex is deadly to the family of God and cannot be allowed to go unchecked and without confrontation as Paul makes clear in the next verse.

2) They confront our sinful actions 4:19

Paul counters the unfounded gossip taking place at Corinth by informing the church, “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills.” Paul absolutely intends to make a visit to Corinth, but he willingly submits his future plans to the sovereign will of the Lord (cf. James 4:15-16). He will not presume on the Lord’s plans for his life. But, trusting that the Lord will allow him to

return to Corinth, he lets them know in no uncertain terms, “I will find out not the talk, but the power of those who are arrogant.” The *Message* says, “we’ll see if they’re full of anything but hot air.” I like the comments of Schreiner here, “During his visit, [Paul] plans not to hold discussions but to uncover the power of those in sin because power, as 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 demonstrates, is manifested in an astonishing way, namely, through the preaching of Christ crucified” (p. 105). Gossip wilts when it is exposed to the searing light of the gospel. Sinful attitudes and sinful actions cannot flourish when its purify heat is applied.

IV. Spiritual fathers correct us as needed

4:20-21

Paul brings his call for unity in 1:10-4:21 to an end. He knows how harmful division and disunity can be in the church when we act more like rival political parties than we do family. His final words in chapter 4 contain a powerful affirmation and a stern warning. Once more we see the spiritual value of listening to our spiritual fathers.

1) They provide spiritual perspective

4:20

“The kingdom of God,” his reign and realm, “is not a matter of talk,” of mere words. Persuasive and flowery rhetoric may gain the attention and applause of the world, but not God. No, the kingdom of God is about “power” found in the gospel of Christ and Him crucified (2:1-5). I really

like the insights provided by Paul Gardner on this verse: “When Paul comes to Corinth, he will be seeking to discover evidence that God in Christ is at work through these leaders. He fears that their grace-gifts, abused to buy them status and honor within the community, will offer no such evidence. The irony is that real evidence will be offered as people’s lives are so changed that they become Christ-like and even “apostle-like,” as has been described earlier. It is in weakness, in being the scum of the earth and yet living for God and his rule that kingdom power will be manifest. This is what Paul desires to see, and so he ends with a statement that is regarded by most as harsh or heavy-handed.” (*I Cor.*, ECNT, 217).

2) They provide spiritual discipline

4:21

Paul concludes with two rhetorical questions that would be certain to get the church’s attention. First, “What do you want?” The idea is, what would you like me to do? How I respond will depend on you and how you respond to my letter. Second, “Should I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?” Again, the *Message* paraphrase is helpful, “So how should I prepare to come to you? As a severe disciplinarian who makes you toe the mark? Or as a good friend and counselor who wants to share heart-to-heart with you? You decide.” Of course the children would prefer hugs and kisses and not a spanking! Paul would prefer the same. The key will be

their response. Paul loves them as his very own children. He will do what ever he must. He loves them too much to let them go on acting like fools and embarrassing themselves. Afterall, he is a good daddy!

Conclusion: Proverbs 3:11-12 reads, “Do not despise the LORD’s instruction, my son, and do not loathe his discipline, for the LORD disciplines the one he loves, just as a father disciplines the son in whom he delights” (cf. Heb. 12:5-6). This is how our heavenly Father treats His children whom He has adopted through the work of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. This is also how our earthly spiritual fathers treat us too. Wise children will listen when their heavenly Father speaks. Wise children will also listen when their earthly spiritual fathers speak too. These fathers have the right to be loved and listened to as the follow in the footsteps of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:1). Obeying them may not always be pleasant. But, it will be for our good. Let’s make our heavenly Father and earthly fathers happy. The world, afterall, is always watching.