

Marks Of A Spiritual Father

Introduction. In 1 Corinthians, Paul has described himself as a servant, a farmer, God's fellow worker, a builder, a steward, and a spiritual father.

The apostle has been stern, even to the point of sarcasm (4:8-10), in rebuking the Corinthians' sins — their division and party spirit. Now he tells them why he has been so harsh: he loves them as a father loves his children. He could say with John, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 4).

In 1 Corinthians 4:14-21, Paul presents by implication and pattern six characteristics of how a faithful spiritual father is responsible for his children. These characteristics are elements necessary in an effective relationship of fellowship.

I. He Admonishes (v. 14)

- A. This was a "not/but" expression where one part of a truth is denied to emphasize the greater, more important point. Paul did write to shame these brethren, but Paul's ultimate object was to admonish them to a better, nobler life.
- B. Admonish means literally "to put in mind," with the purpose of warning and reproving. It presupposes that something is wrong and its intention is to correct and make right. Paul did not want to destroy the Corinthians but to reclaim them.
- C. A spiritual father must lovingly criticize wrong beliefs or wrong behavior with the purpose of bringing correction and change. He will do whatever he must that is right and proper for the welfare of his children (1 Thessalonians 2:10-12; 5:14). The tool for this is the word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

II. He Loves (v. 14)

- A. Although the Corinthians were having problems, they were loved. Paul refers to them as "beloved sons" which represents a very intimate relationship in spirit. Some years later Paul again spoke of his great love for the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 12:14-15). His love for them gave everything and asked for nothing. It was self-sacrificing, far reaching, and lasting.
- B. A father's love is characterized by several items:
 1. It is understanding. He wants to know where they hurt so he can help heal. He wants to know when they are afraid so he can help dispel their fears. He wants to know where they are weak so he can help strengthen them.
 2. It is gentle. Jesus was gentle and meek in heart (Matthew 11:29). Paul sought to be the same way (2 Corinthians 10:1). Like natural children, spiritual children grow slowly. They are not born mature and must be trained lovingly and gently, as well as carefully and sometimes sternly.
 3. It is intense. When those we love are in danger, we cannot help becoming concerned. When our children are small, we worry about them running into the street. So we lecture and explain and still wake up in the middle of the night, having dreamed of one of the children being run over (Acts 20:31).

III. He Begets (v. 15)

- A. Paul illustrates the uniqueness of fatherhood. No child can have more than one natural father. "Countless" can represent the specific figure of 10,000 or simply a

great, numberless amount. “Tutors” refers to home instructors, usually slaves, who were responsible for the training and moral upbringing of small children (cp. Galatians 3:24).

- B. Although they had many spiritual tutors, they only had one who was uniquely their spiritual father. Paul left “spiritual progeny” everywhere he visited and worked (Galatians 4:19; 1 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 10) via the word of God (Psalm 119:50; 1 Peter 1:23).
- C. Unfortunately, many Christians have never become spiritual fathers. They have never produced any spiritual offspring. They have never led a person to obey Christ and helped train them in the ways of God. A Christian is one who has been given new life in Christ and one of the most important characteristics of life is reproduction. In a sense, this is a contradiction to what a Christian should be.

IV. He Exemplifies (v. 16)

- A. Without a good example, a parent’s teaching cannot be effective. Paul was a very good example. He not only could say, “Do as I say,” but also, “Do as I do” (Matthew 23:2-3; 2 Timothy 3:10).
- B. The Greek word is equivalent to our word mimic (cp. 1 Corinthians 11:1; Ephesians 5:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14; Hebrews 6:12). Philosophers, rabbis and teachers in general were models to imitate as well as to listen to. This is one of the most common ideas in Greek literature.
- C. Often the hardest place to teach is in the home. When we teach those outside our families, they see us in ideal situations, where it is easy to act spiritual and mature. But our children see us in all of our moods, attitudes, and actions.
- D. Timothy was so like Paul that he could send him with full confidence and assurance. A church will grow when we become like Christ and then teach others to become like Christ, and they in turn will teach others to be like Christ (1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:7-8; Hebrews 13:7). This provides a great potential multiplication in our work.

V. He Teaches (v. 17)

- A. A major part of converting others is teaching the word of God, telling and explaining its truths. In the case of the Corinthian church, Paul had already taught them carefully for 18 months (Acts 18:11). They had been thoroughly grounded in the word. Timothy’s job was to reinforce those great eternal truths by his own teaching and example (2 Timothy 2:1-2)
- B. We must teach the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Jesus’ teaching not only was the supreme model of power and depth, but also of simplicity. The great crowds to whom He preached were composed mainly of common, uneducated people. Yet they enjoyed listening to Him (Matthew 7:24-26; Mark 12:37).

VI. He Disciplines (vv. 18-21)

- A. When a Christian slips into wrong doctrine or wrong behavior he needs correction. Such confrontations are never easy but they are often necessary. The Corinthian church had a serious problem with pride and self-will, influenced by immorality and false teachers.

- B. Paul would not let their sinning go unchallenged. For their sakes, as well as the gospel's, he could not fail to discipline them. An undisciplined child belongs to parents who do not deeply care about his welfare. Paul was too loving a spiritual father not to discipline (Proverbs 3:12; Hebrews 12:5-6).
- C. Paul deliberately delayed a return to Corinth, but not because he feared any person there. His delay was to allow more time for them to repent so that he would not have to be harsh in action once he arrived (2 Corinthians 1:23).
- D. The power that was first manifested on Pentecost involved the ability to give gifts of the Spirit to others (Acts 8:17-18), to heal a lame beggar (Acts 3:1-8), to raise the dead (Acts 9:40; 20:9-11), to strike death and blindness on those who opposed the gospel (Acts 5:5, 9-10; 13:11). Paul said he would return and would then know, not the boastful words of his critics there, but the power that lay behind their arrogant words. Did they really want such a demonstration and confrontation with Paul?
- E. Paul was hopeful that the erring Corinthians would repent of their arrogance and change before he returned (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12). With what manner Paul came was in the hands of the Corinthians.

Conclusion. In his dealing with that wayward church that he loved so dearly, Paul demonstrates the elements for effective strengthening of spiritual children. These are the marks of every godly father, and these are the characteristics that will shine forth in congregations full of people who want to see others grow in Christ.