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Marks of a Spiritual Father

4: 14-21

Marks of a spiritual father DIG: How can you tell the difference between a godly disciple or one of wayward behavior and abuse? In what way was Paul like a spiritual father to the Corinthian church? In what way were the Corinthians like his spiritual children? Why would Paul consider sending Timothy, who was so much younger and less experienced than himself?

REFLECT: Have you been a spiritual father or a spiritual mother? If not, why not? Who could you spiritually nurture right now? How does a father show tenderness to his children? How would you like to relate to church leadership in light of these verses? If Paul came to your place of worship would he come with a stick? Or with love in a spirit of gentleness? Why?

This was tough love at its best, coming from a loving daddy who needed to be a firm father.



In **his** letter to the church at **Corinth**, **Paul** has described **the** spiritual **leader** and **teacher** as a **servant** (3:5), a **farmer** (3:6), **God's co-worker** (3:9), a **builder** (3:10), a **galley slave** (4:1), and a **steward** (4:1). Now, once again, **he** changes metaphors and describes **him** as a **spiritual father**, using **himself** as an example. **The apostle** has been stern, even to the point of sarcasm (**to see link click [Ax](#) - A Faulty View of God's Gifts**), in rebuking **the Corinthians sins**. But now **he** tells **them** why **he** has been so harsh: **he loves them** as a **father loves his children**. **He** could not bear to see **them** straying from **God's Word** and

the fullness of a godly life. **He** was **their** spiritual **father** and therefore doubly responsible for **their** spiritual welfare. Hence, **Paul** presents, by implication and pattern, **six characteristics of a spiritual father**.

He admonishes: I am not writing you this to make you feel ashamed, but to admonish you and get you to change (4:14a). The Greek word admonish, *noutheteo*, literally means *to put in mind*, and has the primary connotation of trying to have a corrective influence on someone. To correct without provoking or embittering. It was not **Paul's** purpose to **shame them**. **He** would leave that to their own consciences. **His** purpose was to **admonish them**, to encourage **them** and plead with **them** to repent and correct **their** ways. **He** did not want to destroy them, **he** wanted to reclaim **them**.

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being such an awesome **father**! **Paul** followed **Your** loving example of how **You** care for **Your children** - by encouraging and admonishing. **Your** grace thru our faith gives birth to **Your children** (Ephesians 2:8-9). Then through trials and situations of many kinds - **You** lovingly encourage/admonish each **child** to grow strong in **You**. **You have been distressed by various trials. These trials are so that the true metal of your faith (far more valuable than gold, which perishes though refined by fire) may come to light in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Messiah Yeshua (First Peter 1:4).***

*Praise **You** for **Your** complete forgiveness which is so wonderfully wide and deep - for which we humbly bow in worship of **You**. **For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy for those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so Adonai has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalm 103:11). Your love, mercy and forgiveness make **You** an incredible awesome father! Trials will come but they will soon be over. **For I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). Then comes a wonderful eternity of peace and joy with daddy in His holy heaven (Revelation 21:1-4). You are so loved, my wonderful daddy! In Yeshua's holy name and power of His resurrection. Amen.*****

It is possible for a **parent** to correct a **child** in a way that tears down rather than builds up. **Paul** warns: **Fathers, don't irritate your children and make them resentful; instead, raise them with the Lord's kind of discipline and guidance (Ephesians 6:4)**. Even believing parents can sometimes provoke and abuse in the name of **discipline**. Abused **children** are put down with criticism and punishment, but seldom lifted up with praise and

encouragement.

A spiritual **father** must lovingly criticize wrong beliefs and wrong behavior with the purpose of bringing correction and change (**Matthew 18:15-20; First Thessalonians 5:14**). A spiritual **father** must not browbeat, humiliate, or judge self-righteously. A loving **father** does not do such things. But a loving **father** will always strive to admonish, correct, and even **discipline** when necessary. **He** will do whatever it takes (that is right and proper) for the welfare of **his children**. The tool for this is **the Word of God**, for **all Scripture is God-breathed and is valuable for teaching the truth, convicting of sin, correcting faults and training in right living (Second Timothy 3:16).**¹²⁶

He loves: As my beloved children (4:14b): Beloved is from the Greek verb *agapao*, which refers to the strongest and deepest kind of **love**. **It** is more than brotherly love (Greek: *philia*, meaning *a tender affection*). **It** is a **love** that is determined and willful, having the one purpose of serving the object of **love**. **Paul** had referred to **the Corinthians** as **brothers** several times (**1:10, 2:1** and **3:1**), but now **he** calls **them his children**, which represents a more intimate relationship. And they were not merely **children**, but **beloved children**, especially dear to **their spiritual father**. It is clear from what **Paul** has been saying to **them** that **they** were not obedient, morally upright, doctrinally sound, or mature. But **they** were **loved**.

A **loving father** wants to understand **his children** as deeply as possible. **He** wants to know where **they** hurt so that **he** can help **them** 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 strengthen **them**. **He** wants to know **their** needs so **he** can meet them. **Paul loved the Corinthians** in that way. **He loved them**, understanding **their** situation and **their** needs.

A **loving father** is **gentle**. **Yeshua** was **gentle and humble in heart (Matthew 11:29)**, and **Paul** sought to treat **the Corinthians** with **the meekness and gentleness of Yeshua (Second Corinthians 10:1)**. Spiritual **children**, like natural **children**, grow up slowly. **They** are not born mature and must be trained lovingly and **gently**, as well as carefully and sometimes sternly (**First Thessalonians 2:7-8**). **Paul** never uses the term “disciples” in **his** letters. **The people** in **his** churches were **his children** because **he loved them**.¹²⁷

He fathers: Here **Paul** illustrates the uniqueness of **fatherhood**. No **child** can have more than one natural **father**. In the spiritual realm as well, **the Corinthians** had countless **tutors** in **Messiah**, but only one spiritual **father**. **For even if you have ten thousand tutors** (Greek *paidagogos*, referring to *home instructors, usually slaves, who were responsible for the basic training and moral upbringing of small children*). *They were not*

teachers in a formal sense, but were more guardians and helpers) in connection with the Messiah, you do not have many fathers. And Paul was the spiritual father of most of them. It is important to note here that he was not saying that he was the source of spiritual life, but was the tool used by ADONAI.

For in connection with the Messiah Yeshua it was I who became your father by means of the Good News (4:15). Paul left spiritual children everywhere he visited and ministered. He had founded numerous churches in the province of Galatia, and when he wrote to them he addressed them not only as his brothers (Galatians 1:11 and 4:12), but also as his children (Galatians 4:19). Paul called Timothy his “true child in the faith” (First Timothy 1:2 NASB), and Titus his “true child in a common faith” (Titus 1:4 NASB). The runaway slave Onesimus was the apostle’s child whom he had begotten in his imprisonment (Philemon 10). Everywhere he went Paul led people to Messiah, thereby becoming their spiritual father.

Unfortunately, many believers have never become spiritual fathers (or mothers). They have never produced any spiritual offspring. They have never led a person to Messiah and helped train him in the ways of the LORD. A believer is one who has been given new life in Messiah, and one of the most important characteristics of life is reproduction. Healthy things reproduce. Healthy plants reproduce, healthy animals reproduce, and healthy believers reproduce spiritually. Yet some never do. Every believer should be a spiritual father (or mother), God’s instrument for bringing new lives into His Kingdom.

He sets an example: In case the Corinthians would miss it, Paul takes the father-child metaphor a step further, and in doing so spells out the point of the entire teaching. Since they had but one spiritual father, therefore, the apostle declares: **I urge you to imitate me.**¹²⁸ Without a good example, a parent’s teaching cannot be effective. A spiritual father must set an example for his spiritual children, as Paul was careful to do. With confidence, but without bragging, he could say: **Imitate me.** He could not only say, “Do as I say,” but also, “Do as I do.”

Paul was so successful as a discipler that he could entrust his discipling to those he had disciplined. **This is why I have sent you Timothy, my beloved and trustworthy child in the Lord. He will remind you of the way of life I follow in union with the Messiah Yeshua (4:16-17a).** When Paul says: **For this reason,** he is referring to the goal of making the Corinthians imitators of himself. To accomplish that, he sent Timothy. What a concept! Paul had done such a complete work as a spiritual father to Timothy, that he could send Timothy to continue discipling the Corinthians on his behalf. He was the

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That is the goal of raising spiritual **children**: being able to send **them** to minister in our place. When we are **Messiah**-like, those we disciple will be more likely to become **Messiah**-like, and be able to **teach** others to become **Messiah**-like. This obviously provides a potentially great multiplication of ministry. **Paul loved Timothy** and commended **him** as a faithful **child** who would bring back to mind the **Messiah**-like life pattern of **Paul**, because it was so much like **his** own life pattern.¹²⁹

He teaches: And teach everywhere in every congregation (4:17b). We cannot believe **truths** we do not know, or live principles we have never heard of. A major part of discipling is **teaching the Word of God** and explaining **its truths**. In the case of **the Corinthian** church, **Paul** had already **taught them** carefully for **a year-and-a-half (Acts 18:11)**. **Timothy's** job was to **remind them** of what **Paul** had already **taught** and the way **he** had lived among **them**. **Paul** had **taught** the same **truths everywhere in every congregation**, indicating that **he** was referring to doctrine rather than some specific advice. **Timothy** would reinforce those great eternal **truths** by **his** own **teaching** and **his** own example.

It is not enough to be correct in what we teach; we must also be understandable. When we put aside our degrees, academic accomplishments, and theological jargon, simply **speaking the truth in love, we will in every respect grow up** those we are **teaching** to be **imitators of Messiah (Ephesians 4:15)**. If we **love** those we witness to and disciple, our objective will not be to impress them with our learning, but to help them with theirs.

Yeshua's teaching was not only the supreme model of power and depth, but also of simplicity (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Hs - The Parable of the Lost Sheep**). **He** put "the cookies on the bottom shelf," so to speak, so they were easy to get to. The great crowds to whom **He** preached and **taught** were composed of mostly common, uneducated folk. Yet, **they** "enjoyed listening to **Him**," or as the Bible says: **They listened eagerly to Him (Mark 12:37)**.

He disciplines: There are times when spiritual **fathers**, like natural **fathers**, have to **discipline their children**. When a believer slips into wrong doctrine, or wrong behavior, he needs correction. He needs to be told in **love**, but with firmness, "Your testimony is not what it ought to be. You are not living by the biblical principles you have learned. You need to change." Period. Such confrontations are never easy, but they are often necessary.¹³⁰

Here, in the context of **his** own anticipated **coming (16:5-9)**, **Paul** concludes this long section (see **Ai - Divisions in the Church at Corinth**) by sounding a warning directly

toward **the false prophets** in the church who were causing problems (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Af - The Problem of the False Apostles**). The problem was not simply internal division because **they** were “playing favorites” with **their** leaders. **Some** in the church were decidedly and proactively against **Paul**.

Although the entire church had been infected, probably to varying degrees, **the false prophets** were a smaller group among them. It is noteworthy that at the end of this long argument, carried on against the entire church indiscriminately, **Paul** would at last zero in on **the false prophets** in particular. The problem, of course, is that they had considerable influence on the entire church, so that the majority are on the side of **the troublemakers**, or at least being heavily influenced by **them**. But at the end of the argument, **Paul** singles **them** out as the **ringleaders** and threatens **them** with **his** own coming. These are **people** who have despised both **Paul’s** authority and **his** theology. To the degree the church as a whole had tolerated (or adopted) so much ungodly behavior as a result of **their** subversive activities, **they** too were at fault.¹³¹

When I didn’t come to visit you, some of you became arrogant (4:18). The false prophets thought **they** could get by with doing whatever **they** wanted. **They** may have been so arrogant as to think **Paul** would not dare confront **them**. Contrary to what **they** hoped, however, **Paul** assured **them** that **he** planned a visit to see **them** again **and soon**. The fact that **he hadn’t come to visit them** probably means that **he** had promised to do so, but had been delayed for reasons beyond **his** control. Now this was being used against **him** by **the false prophets**. Like those at the base of Mount Sinai who were impatient with **Moshe coming down from the mountain** and built a **gold calf** (see the commentary on **Exodus Gr - Aaron Made an Idol in the Shape of a Calf**), **the false prophets** became idols when **they** said to the church, **as far as this fellow [Paul] is concerned, we don’t know what has happened to him**. Causing **division** among **the brothers** is one of **the seven things** that **ADONAI** hates (**Proverbs 6:19**).

But Paul drew a line in the sand with **his** bold statement: **I will come - and soon - if the Lord lets me, and then I’ll find out whether these arrogant people just give pretentious speeches or whether they really have God’s power. For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God’s power (4:19-20 NLT)**. In spite of what **the false prophets** thought **Paul** might be afraid to do when **he** returned, **Paul’s** first order of business would be to call the bluff of **those** who were blatant in causing division within the church. **Their sinning** would not go unchallenged. For **their** own sakes, as well as the gospel’s sake, **he** would not fail to **discipline them**.¹³²

As a result of the problems caused by **the false prophets**, **Paul** eventually made a second, quick trip to **Corinth to deal** with the troubles that were serious enough to require direct personal confrontation (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Ae - Events Between First Corinthians and Second Corinthians**). During this **visit Paul** was personally attacked by one of **the false prophets (Second Corinthians 2:5)**. This **visit** was a **painful visit** for both **Paul** and **his** spiritual **children** (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Am - Paul's Painful Visit**).

With one last use of **the father-child** metaphor. **Paul** was hopeful that **the** believing **Corinthians**, who had been charmed by the lies of **the false prophets**, would repent and change before **he** returned. **He** gave them a choice: **Which do you prefer - should I come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness (4:21)? Paul** had made his own preference clear. **He** did not want to **shame them**, but to admonish **them** as **children** whom **he loved** dearly. This is the mark of every **loving father**.

However, if **he** needed to use **the stick** to shape **them** up, **he** would use **one!** **He**, of course, did not mean a literal "stick" to beat **them** with, but an attitude and spirit of strong, painful **discipline** (see the commentary on **Hebrews Cz - God Disciplines His Children**). **He** would deal sternly with **their** pride; the **sin God** hates most. But if **they** responded favorably to **his** letter, **he** would treat **them** with restrained, patient kindness.¹³³ This was tough **love** at its best, coming from a **loving** daddy who needed to be a firm **father**.