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1 Corinthians 4:14-21 “How to Be a Godly Father”

Intro. The Billionaire Donald Trump was asked what was the best thing he’s ever done. He said, “Well, I’ve created four beautiful children. You mean, other than that?”¹ Indeed, being a good father or mother is one of life’s most important privileges. But being a father or mother is also one of life’s most difficult responsibilities. And I suppose that raising good children is more difficult now than it was in previous generations. We need help. It is easy to become a biological father, but hard to become a really good father. Some of you were taught parenting skills by the example of your own parents. Others are pretty clueless when it comes to parenting. So I want to turn your attention to the Word of God for guidance concerning this very important responsibility.

Now in this text of Scripture Paul compares himself to a father of the Corinthian believers. He was not their biological father, but he was a spiritual father to them. He was instrumental in bringing them to faith in Christ. Through Paul’s gospel they were born again. And like a father he loved them, taught them, set an example for them, admonished them, and was even willing to discipline them like a father. So even though this text deals primarily with being a good spiritual parent in terms of witnessing and discipleship, I believe we can glean some good guidelines for parenting our children today. So those of us who are fathers or mothers of children under our care would do well to listen carefully to what Paul has to say here.

This morning I want to share with you 5 commands for every father and mother. If you will follow these commands, you will be the kind of parent that your children need.

Now the first and most important commandment is this:

I. LOVE YOUR CHILDREN

We see this principle indicated several times in this text by way of Paul’s own example. He said in the last of v.14, “as my beloved children I warn you.” In v.17 he called Timothy his “beloved . . . son in the Lord.” In v.21 we see that Paul preferred to show his love for them by a spirit of gentleness, and not by the rod of discipline. So we must love our children above all else.

And note the type of love we should have. The word “beloved” in v.14 is from the Greek word *agape*, which refers to the strongest kind of love, the kind of love God has for us. There are 4 characteristic of the kind of love that God has:

A. It Is Willful, not Primarily Emotional – There are times as a parent when you don’t *feel* as much love for your children. When they are misbehaving, or when they have a bad attitude, you may *feel* rather unloving toward them. In fact, there are some parents who have gotten so upset at their children that they have actually said, “I hate you.” But

¹ Donald Trump in *Esquire*, quoted in *Reader's Digest*, 4/04 [Illus.#C-912].

whether we feel like it or not, we must choose to love our children at all times. And this is the basis of the 2nd characteristic of love:

B. It is Unconditional - It is clear from what Paul has been saying to them that the Corinthian believers were not obedient, morally upright, doctrinally sound, or mature. Yet, he addresses them as “beloved.” In spite of their faults, Paul loved them. The Corinthians did little to deserve Paul’s love, but they had it in full measure. His love for them gave everything, and asked for nothing. This is the kind of love that God has for us. Rom. 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Have you seen some of those stories about children’s definitions of love? Some favorites include the insight of Mary Ann, age four, who observed, “Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.”²

Is your love for your children unconditional?

C. It Seeks to Meet the Needs of the One Loved - True love recognizes the needs of the one loved, and then makes any sacrifice necessary to meet that need. Paul said in a later letter to the Corinthians, “I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls” (2 Cor. 12:15). Love meets the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs of our children. Your children need food, clothing, and shelter, and any loving parent will provide for their basic needs. If your children are hurt, they need healing and comfort. Furthermore, a child needs affirmation. Finally, as we will see later in the message, a child needs correction and discipline. Prov. 3:12 says, “For whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father, the son in whom he delights (cf. Heb. 12:6; Rev. 3:19).

Are you meeting all of the needs of your children?

D. It is Gentle – Paul said in v.21, “What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?” Sometime fathers, and even mothers, can be harsh, and mean-spirited. But whenever possible, love will cause us to have a gentle spirit toward our children. Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23), and is a characteristic of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 10:1).

Listen, the vast majority of time we need to maintain a gentle spirit with our children. We need to temper our anger. Love will do that. In fact, Paul said in 1 Cor. 13 that love “is longsuffering” and “not provoked [to anger].” Children grow slowly. They are not born mature and must be trained lovingly and gently, as well as carefully and sometimes sternly (Cf. I Th. 2:7-8).

Is your love for your children gentle?

Now one aspect of showing true love for your children is to give them direction and training. The Bible says in Prov. 22:6, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” We have a responsibility as parents to train and guide our children in the way they should go. They need direction in life. And the rest of my message deals with that aspect of parenting. So my next command for parents is this:

² Preaching (March-April, 2004), 74.

II. TEACH YOUR CHILDREN

Notice what Paul says in v.17, “For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.” Paul not only won people to Jesus, but he also taught those new believers the Word of God. Even so, teaching is an important parental responsibility. In fact, this past Mother’s Day we discussed this truth from Dt. 6:4-7, where God commanded the Israelites to teach His truth & commandments to their children and grandchildren. Children must be taught what to believe, and how to live. They are not going to be taught about the Lord in public school. You need to see to it that your children come to Sunday School & church. AWANA is a great Bible teaching & memory program. But even that is not enough. They need to hear biblical teaching from you as a parent.

Now there are several truths about teaching that I want to point out from this text:

A. Our Teaching Should Include Spiritual Instruction – It is not enough to teach our children about history, math, science, and English. We need to teach them about the Lord as well. As a spiritual father to the Corinthian believers, Paul certainly taught them about the Lord and His ways. In v.17 the content of Paul’s teaching is described as “my ways in Christ.” That certainly includes Paul’s pattern of conduct. Indeed, you should teach your children right from wrong. There is a right way to live, and a wrong way to live.

But our teaching needs to include doctrine as well. The foundation of right conduct is right thinking about God. Prov. 23:7 says, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.” The OT refers to the “ways of the Lord,” which are marked out in His Word. Rev. 15:3 says, “righteous and true are Thy ways.” We are to teach our children biblical truths about God. He is loving, righteous, good, kind, faithful, truthful, and so forth. And we are to be like God. We need to teach values.

In the wake of the shootings at Columbine High School, researchers sought to discover what could be done to curb the violence. When asked which would have a greater impact on reducing school violence, 77 percent chose teaching children about right and wrong and about the value of respect for human life. Only 10 percent said more gun control laws are needed.

And I want to give you 2 suggestions. First, have a Bible devotional with your children each day, either at bedtime, or at mealtime. Secondly, be ready to share biblical truths, morals, and values as you face day-to-day life situations. There were many times when I had opportunity to teach Andrew & David the New Testament principle that we are to pay no one evil for evil. Of course in order to teach your children about God, and about right from wrong, you need to learn these truths yourself. You need to learn the Bible well enough to pass on your faith & values to your children.

B. Our Teaching Should Be Consistent – In the last of v.17 Paul said that Timothy “will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.” These teachings were consistently taught by Paul in every church. Because churches have gotten away from God’s wisdom and have substituted man’s wisdom, we have serious doctrinal differences among various churches. But this shouldn’t be so. There should be

consistent teaching from church to church. Even so, parents need to be consistent in our teaching. Both mom and dad need to be consistent in their teaching.

C. Our Teaching Should Employ Repetition – In v.17 we see that Timothy was sent to remind them of Paul’s teaching. Timothy was to reinforce the teaching of God’s Word by repetition. Educators know that repetition is one method of instruction. That’s just how the brain works. Children are not going to learn something the first time, or even the 2nd time they hear it. They need to hear biblical truths and commands over and over again.

The brain has billions of cells, and we remember something especially when a neurological pathway is created by repetition. I visited the Chesterfield County government buildings recently. They have sidewalks. But I noticed that over time people had taken a shortcut and created a very visible dirt path. That happened only by repetition.

Don’t be afraid to use repetition. They may roll their eyes and say, “I’ve heard that before.” Well, just say to them, “Yes, and you’re going to hear it again.”

III. BE AN EXAMPLE TO YOUR CHILDREN

Paul says in v.16, “Therefore I urge you, imitate me.” [Literally, it is “become mimics of me.”] Likewise, Paul said in 1 Cor. 11:1, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” Paul lived an exemplary life before other believers, and so he taught by example. In fact, what we see has a greater impact upon us than what we hear. And without a good example, a parent’s teaching cannot be effective. And our children are more likely to follow what we do than what we say. Furthermore, little children learn first by example, then by explanation. Paul not only could say, “Do as I say,” but also, “Do as I do.” This also means that you need to spend time with your children so they can see your example in everyday life. Someone has said, “So live that when your son speaks of you he will stick out his chest instead of his tongue.”³

Now this matter of setting an example is especially difficult with our children. After all, when we disciple those outside our families, they often see us only 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. Children have a way of imitating their parents, either for good or for ill.

What kind of an example are you setting? Well what would you do in the following situations: 1) A motorist tailgates you, then cuts in front of you just before you both stop at a red light. Do you get his attention and give him some choice words or a hand gesture? 2) When taking the family to places that offer discounts to children, do you ever tell your kids to shave a year or two off their ages? 3) You are about to embark on a trip to Disney, and your child will miss school. Do you tell the teacher the reason for the absence, or do you make up an excuse like they are sick, or they have to go to a funeral?⁴

Ken Hemphill tells the story of what took place at his church when he was pastor of FBC of Norfolk. He was out on the sidewalk welcoming people as they got out of their cars. About 3rd in line was a father & his teenage son. The father had a golf shirt on, and

³ Sparks in Pulpit Helps, June 2005, page 9.

⁴ Mona Behan in *Family Life*.

he evidently was dropping his son off at church while he went to play golf. The pastor could hear the teenage boy complaining and asking why he had to go to church. He replied, "When I was growing up my daddy took me to church every Sunday, and you are going to church as well." Then the boy replied, "Well, it doesn't look like it did you any good for you, did it?"

Listen, parents should set a good example, but when they don't, you follow your Heavenly Father. Your highest obligation is to follow Him. A bad example does not give you the excuse to do wrong. And because of our failure in this regard, at least 3 times in the Old Testament God told the Israelites, "Do not be like your fathers..." (2 Chron. 30:7; Ps. 78:8; Zec. 1:4). Sometimes parents are not the example they should be. Someone said, "If you can't be a good example — then you'll just have to be a horrible warning."

IV. ADMONISH YOUR CHILDREN

Paul says in v.14, "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you." The word translated "warn" literally means "to put in mind," with the purpose of warning and reproving. Now even when you teach your children right from wrong, you can be sure that they will be inclined to do wrong. So you should also admonish and warn them of the consequences of doing wrong. And when you catch them doing something wrong, you need to admonish them again, and warn them of the consequences of their behavior. And be sure to warn them in love. Notice that Paul addressed them as "beloved children." He reminded them of his love for them.

The best tool for admonition is the Word of God, as we see in 2 Tim. 3:16-17. Then, you are not only using parental authority, but also the authority of God's Word.

Now some children are rather hard-headed. You can teach them right from wrong, but they will not learn their lesson until they do wrong, suffer the consequences, and then finally realize that you were right regarding what you warned them about. By the way, that one reason the perception of parents' intelligence goes up once a child moves from being a teenage to an adult. When they are teenagers, they are looking to become independent, and you are standing in their way. You're telling them stuff they shouldn't do, and they warn you of the consequences. To them, you are out of touch with "the real world." But once they become adults, they look back and realize how right you were in your teaching and warnings, and suddenly, you're not so dumb any more!

And notice that Paul mentioned a wrong way to admonish someone in v.14, "I do not write these things to shame you...." That is one method of correction that can be effective. Back in the old days of Colonial America, if you were caught doing something wrong, your head & hands would be put in the stocks outside the courthouse, and you became the object of shame. Even today a naughty child is required to stand in the corner, partly to shame them. But that is not Paul's preferred method of correction, though at times he used it (2 Thess. 3:14; Tit. 2:8). And even though Paul probably made them ashamed of their conduct by his comments, this was not his main purpose. Paul is engaged in something that is far more important than merely making them ashamed.

Some parents use shame as their primary method of discipline and correction. Their child comes home with a bad report card. And then they begin to shame them. They say, "You dummy! Why can't you make decent grades like other children? What's wrong

with you?” Then the shame gets worse when they tell everybody about their child’s report card in front of the child. You may think that such shame will motivate them to do better, but often it creates an opposite effect. Such correction can tear down a child rather than build them up (See Eph. 6:4). You can so destroy a child’s self-image that you can leave permanent scars. They begin to believe that they are a dummy, and really can’t do any better. Success is largely determined by how much confidence we have in our God-given abilities. So be very careful about using shame as a means of admonition and correction. It may be OK to use this method occasionally when other methods don’t work, but don’t use shame as a regular method of correction. Shame touches only the feelings, teaching and admonition reaches the mind & heart.

There was a mother in my previous church who had a teenage son who was not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Her younger son was much smarter, and much more capable. And I believe she made things worse by the way she would talk about her son publicly. Many people like to talk, and it almost seemed that she enjoyed making fun of the dumb things her son had done. That’s no way to help your children.

Now as an example of someone who failed at this was Eli the high priest. His sons Hophni and Phinehas were very wicked. They abused the sacrificial offering and committed fornication. And yet, for a long time their father never even reprovved them. And the Scriptures tell us that his own life and that of his sons ended tragically because he had not admonished them as a firm, caring, loving father. And failure to admonish spiritual children can be just as tragic. We must not browbeat or humiliate or judge self-righteously. But we do have a responsibility to reprove and admonish our children.

Now it is not enough to lead and direct your children in the right way by teaching and admonition. There is something else we must do:

V. DISCIPLINE YOUR CHILDREN

When a Christian or a child slips into wrong doctrine or wrong behavior, he needs correction. Talk is not enough. Paul says in v.18, “Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you.” In other words, some were saying that Paul was all talk, and no action. They were saying, “His bark is worse than his bite!” The Corinthian church had problems. Through this letter and through Timothy Paul reminded them of the right way they should live, and if they did not straighten up, he was willing to come back to Corinth and deal with the offenders.

In fact, notice in v.21 Paul’s willingness to use discipline. He said, “What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?” If Paul was able to go back to Corinth, his first order of business would be to call the bluff of those who were blatant in their backsliding. He would not let their sinning go unchallenged. And here he gives them a choice. He makes his own preference clear. He did not want to shame them, but admonish them. He did not want to use “rod”, but come in a spirit of gentleness. It is very doubtful that Paul has in mind here a literal rod. Can you imagine missionary Paul lining up all the rebellious church members, and giving each one a good whipping? I don’t think so. He is just extending the parental illustration here. Instead, he is referring to an attitude of strong, painful discipline. But he could come in gentleness only if they repented. We can put away the rod only when our children do not need it any longer.

Paul's reference to the rod reminds us of the fact that the rod was a common form of parental discipline until only recently. Prov. 13:24 says, "He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him promptly." Prov. 22:15 says, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him." Prov. 23:13 "Do not withhold correction from a child, For if you beat him with a rod, he will not die." Prov. 29:15 says, "The rod and rebuke give wisdom, But a child left to himself brings shame to his mother." My grandmother Clark was from the old school of discipline. One time I did something wrong and she made me go out and cut my own switch. And if what I brought wasn't big enough, she would send me back to get another one. And then my legs carried a message to my brain, "Don't ever do that again!" Folks, you will never convince me that we are better off using the modern approaches to correction. Someone has said, "Everything in the modern home is controlled by switches...except the children."⁵ Now I'm not advocating physical abuse of any child, but a carefully controlled administration of corporal punishment is not going to hurt your child. What is going to hurt your child is a lack of discipline, and a lack of parental respect. So when your children ask for discipline, give it to them! They need to know that you love them enough to set limits, and there is security in knowing that there are limits. Psa. 23:4b says, "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Speaking of that, we see here an illustration of the serious problem of a lack of parental respect. Do your children see you as all talk and no action? Do you warn your children of what the consequences will be if they do wrong, and then do nothing to impose the consequences? Do you make threats, and not carry out your threats? You say, "I'm warning you for the last time," and then it become clear that it wasn't really the last time. If you're not careful, you will begin to sound like the modern mother who shouted at her spoiled son, "This is the last time I'm going to tell you for the last time!" It doesn't take long for your children to loose respect for you. Without strong leadership in the home, your children will think that they can get by with "murder."

Now the flip side of this issue can also be a problem. Sometimes children are all talk and no action. Some children can talk a good game but their lives don't back it up. Paul says in v.19, "But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power." No doubt, the Corinthians had all sorts of excuses and arguments for their behavior. But Paul was not looking for words, but spiritual power in their lives. Faith that does not result in right living may have many words to support it, but it will have no power. So parents, don't accept excuses too often. Promises to do right are not enough. We need to see right conduct in our children, not good arguments. Teenagers, you want your parents to trust you. Well trust is built upon a pattern of right action, not just talk.

Conclusion: Dad, which kind of father do you want to be? Will you make the commitment to be the kind of father that we have read about today? It could make a real impact on your children if you make a public commitment to become the kind of father God wants you to be. For some, the best thing you could do for your children is to give you heart & life to Jesus Christ. Or perhaps you need to move your membership to this church, where your wife and children are members.

⁵ "Old Union Reminder" in *Pulpit Helps*, 4/04, 18.

Sources: R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: 1 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).