



# CHARIS-MATTERS

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STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 4:14-21

Topic

Paul speaks to the believers at Corinth as the person who led them to the Lord and warns them that when he comes he will have to discipline them as a father would his children unless they start obeying God

Title

*“Just Wait Until Your Father Gets Home”*

Introduction

“Like father, like son,” said the narrator as a dad and his six year old painted the side of their house. The scene shifted to them driving along in their 1967 Mustang convertible - the father driving and the son in a car seat that had a pretend steering wheel. As the dad give the arm signal for a left turn, so did his boy. Then they washed the car together, the father using the hose and the son his squirt gun. After that they took a walk in the woods and the son mimicked his dad throwing a stone.

Finally, after a long day of father/son fun, they are seen sitting under a tree. The dad reaches in to his coat pocket and takes out a pack of smokes. As he’s lighting up he sets them down on the ground between he and his boy. The son looks at them, then looks up at his dad smoking, and the narrator asks, “Like father, like son? *Think about it!*”

First Corinthians 4:14-21

*“Just Wait Until Your Father Gets Home”*

It was an anti-smoking ad that ran from 1967 until 1982. There have been many other ads and campaigns that have played on the power of parental example. A slew of recent studies tout the power of parental example over that of peers and other factors in the lifestyle and behavioral choices of kids.

**Parental example is at the heart of our text in First Corinthians.** The apostle Paul, who had pioneered the work in Corinth, told the believers he was their spiritual father by virtue of bringing them the Gospel by which they were born again. As their spiritual father he encouraged them to mimic him - to be “like father, like son.”

It's wise to be careful when trying to apply this analogy.

- We are told by Jesus to call no man “father” (Matthew 23:8-12).
- Paul was in a unique position of spiritual authority as a first century apostle that doesn't really exist anymore.
- Even if you have led someone to the Lord the idea that you are their “father” can be taken too far.

With those cautions, I think there is an application for us. We should all see ourselves as spiritual parents to one another in one very important sense: We can (and do) influence the lifestyle and behavioral choices of other believers we are in relationships with.

We are brothers and sisters in the Lord. But we are also to conduct ourselves with the maturity and responsibility of parents as we influence one another by our example.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Think Of Yourself As A Spiritual Parent Who Sets An Example, and #2 Think Of Yourself As A Spiritual Parent Who Speaks With An Empowering.

## #1 Think Of Yourself As A Spiritual Parent Who Sets An Example

(v14-17)

In these opening chapters Paul was dealing with the problem of division among the believers in the church at Corinth. It seems different factions were forming within the church as folks rallied around the teachings of either Paul or Apollos or Peter.

None of those guys were there in Corinth at the time. It tells us that others in the church were the real instigators of the divisions. We're going to learn, too, that among those causing the division were at least some who were not just rallying people for their favorite teachers but were actively against Paul.

It always strikes me as odd that people who present themselves as spiritual nevertheless tear down others. *Don't let them get away with it!*

At this point in the letter Paul is just about done addressing the problem of division. Starting in chapter five he's going to take up the subject of church discipline. In making the transition from one topic to the next he suggests to them that he was like their father. He'd rather enjoy their company when he returned but he had the responsibility to discipline them if necessary.

1 Corinthians 4:14 I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you.

Children don't always see the big picture. They can easily think you are being unfair or even mean to them. But you're their parent and you have a certain responsibility to raise them "in the way that they should go."

As I mentioned, if you are a Christian, then other believers are your brothers and sisters. There will be times, however, when you must act as a parent. A lot of times we don't because we think it isn't our place. If it's not our place to warn those we love, whose place is it?

What do believers need to be “warn[ed]” about? Lots of stuff: false doctrine, wolves in sheep’s clothing, liberties that stumble others, stirring up one another’s gifts, and spiritual apathy all come to mind. Sometimes it’s the latest book or program that has everyone in a frenzy but is not really biblical.

1 Corinthians 4:15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

Again I stress that we not take this illustration too far. Even if you are privileged to lead someone to Jesus Christ, you’re really just assisting with spiritual birth. **You are a parent not in the sense of having authority over them but of having responsibility towards them.**

The word for “instructors” was a very technical term in the Greek culture. It is the word from which we get our English word *pedagogue*. In those first century days a pedagogue was a slave who conducted the children of wealthy citizens to and from school. They were sort of like nannies who oversaw the daily activities and behavior of the children.

Paul was making an impassioned appeal to believers he had led to the Lord to recall his unique relationship to them. He had risked life and limb to bring them the Gospel so that they could be born spiritually. They should return the love. The people they were gravitating towards, who were causing division, had risked very little if anything at all.

In our application it is an exhortation to see ourselves as parents and not just pedagogues. It’s a much tougher, much more demanding, responsibility. But it is also much more rewarding in the end.

1 Corinthians 4:16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me.

If there is one statement in Scripture that will humble you, it’s this one. Could I say, “I urge you, imitate me?” It’s pretty bold!

As I meditate on it the Lord will show me, show you, show us, areas where if we were imitated it would be detrimental. We should then want to make the spiritual changes, the adjustments, that would make us more the example Jesus intends.

Make no mistake about it: Someone out there **is** going to imitate you. Christians are always looking to one another to understand what it means to walk with the Lord. *You are being imitated!*

1 Corinthians 4:17 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.

For what “reason?” Partially as an example of what someone looked like who imitated Paul. First century Christians were familiar with Paul referring to himself as a spiritual father to Timothy. Timothy was a poster child for maturity in Christ. Folks were arguing, dividing, over various teachers and, as we will see in the next set of verses, accusing Paul of various shortcomings. But in Timothy they could see the fruit of Paul’s teaching. His “ways in Christ,” his teaching and applications, that he taught “everywhere in every church” produced Timothy and could produce as many Timothy’s and Timothina’s as would receive his teaching.

Before we move on we should stop and think about Paul as an example. The two words that come to mind when I think of Paul are suffering and sacrifice.

- Jesus Himself said of Paul, “For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake” (Acts 9:16). And suffer he did - but always with grace which was sufficient for his situation.
- As for living sacrificially, every episode in Paul’s life is an object lesson in personal sacrifice of time or treasure or talent dedicated to serving the Lord.

We are not called to be apostles; certainly not. But we are all called to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel and, along the way, to suffer.

Do you have a person, a Christian, who is an example to you? Someone who today we might call a mentor? That's great - as long as that person, or those people, are exemplifying real sacrifice and genuine grace in suffering.

Our spiritual heroes should not be folks who have chosen an easier Christianity that has cost them very little of this world's comforts. Like "father," like sons and daughters. We're here to serve, not to reign. To submit, to sacrifice, to suffer.

#2 Think Of Yourself As A Spiritual Parent  
Who Speaks With An Empowering  
(v18-21)

We begin to see that there were some at Corinth who were against Paul, who were badmouthing him.

1 Corinthians 4:18 Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you.

From this and other information tucked away in both First and Second Corinthians we learn that certain people in the church accused Paul of abandoning them. It was their way of sowing seeds of doubt.

This is an all too common ploy that people use to tear others down. They start criticizing some servant of the Lord for what appears to be a shortcoming. Maybe it is a shortcoming; *we all have them!*

Those who act that way are "puffed up." They are acting with pride - and that's worse than the thing they might be accusing someone else of!

1 Corinthians 4:19 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.

Paul was ministering in Ephesus. He hadn't been released by God to return to Corinth. He was following "the Lord's will."

Remember when Lazarus was sick and they told Jesus about it? He waited. Lazarus died! Was that the Lord's will? You betcha it was!

First Corinthians 4:14-21  
"Just Wait Until Your Father Gets Home"

The servant of the Lord isn't free to do what he or she pleases whenever they want. To accuse the Lord's servant of not caring or not seeing and meeting some need is just sinful.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to analyze whether or not "the word of those who [were] puffed up" was just words or did they have "power." This is relatively easy. The very fact they were speaking against Paul, preferring one teacher over another, splitting the church, proved they were puffed up.

No matter how spiritual you think someone is, if they are doing things that contribute to division or are speaking against God's leaders they are puffed up.

Anyone talking like that, anyone acting like that, is not doing so in the "power" of the Lord by the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit. It's just not how the Spirit rolls!

1 Corinthians 4:20 For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power.

Anyone can talk a good walk. The proof is in the walk - in a changed life that is lived moment-by-moment in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. God is changing us day-by-day into the image of Jesus. As we see Him in the mirror of the Word of God we become more like Him.

Christ-likeness is what should attract us in a person. Again I would stress sacrifice and a measure of suffering for the sake of the Gospel as key qualities to look for.

Paul suggested we imitate him. A little later he will say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." Jesus left Heaven, came to earth, and served men who ultimately nailed Him to the Cross. There has to be sacrifice; there will be suffering.

1 Corinthians 4:21 What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?

Paul laid it on the line. He was definitely going to return to Corinth. When he did it would be up to them whether or not he came to spend Father's Day with them or to administer the spanking they needed.

We do not have the authority of an apostle. We do have the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Our words are always to be with grace (Colossians 4:6) as we speak as the oracles of God (First Peter 4:11).

Parents don't have the luxury of ignoring their children's behavior. All of us are quick to notice out-of-control kids and the lackadaisical attitude of their parents. Who among us hasn't thought - especially before you had kids - "If that were my kid I'd take them out and spank them!"

Our application is not so much in the area of *disciplining* one another as it is in *discipling* one another. We should speak empowered words that encourage others to get more involved serving the Lord, not less. To make the right spiritual choices. To grow in grace. To control their liberties so that others are not stumbled. To stir up their gifts. To see them submitted to Jesus and to proper biblical authority.

The list is endless. We should speak words, empowered words, that encourage a person to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

All of us have the responsibilities of spiritual parents to one another.

- First be certain you are sacrificing and showing grace in suffering.
- Then encourage others to do the same - by both your walk and your words.