

1 Corinthians 4:6-21

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[0 : 00] Sometimes I think of Paul in 1 Corinthians, now that we come to the conclusion of the first section, chapter 1 through 4. As having taken vows before God to raise his children, in this case the church at Corinth, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Think of those two terms, in the care of, but also with the correction needed that they would follow the Lord.

It's as clear as the light of day by the time we come to our reading in verse 14. I do not write these things to shame you, to make you ashamed, but to admonish you.

I'm admonishing you, my children, as beloved children. For though you have not countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

It's wonderful to see that because you know then that the strong words, which really are the bulk of our text today, come from the mind and heart of a father who is attempting to rear his children in the admonition of the Lord.

[1 : 16] The word admonish is an interesting word, a compound word, coming from, on one end, the word mind, and then the word to arrange.

To admonish one is to arrange, or in this case, rearrange your mind. For the heart of the father is that his children would grow up to be in the Lord.

Corinth, this child of Paul's. Interestingly, it's as direct as it can be here that the entire tonal quality of the letter is familial.

It's apparent to a child. We saw hints of that, didn't we, back at chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, where he addressed them as infants and himself as the one who nurtured them with food, milk.

We saw this hinted at all the way back in chapter 1, verses 10, 11, and 12 and following with those initial questions that he asks in verse 13.

[2 : 27] Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? And we mentioned way back then that those sounded like questions a parent would ask a child.

These rhetorical questions that call the child to recognize what is and what is not.

And so, chapter 1 to 4, we have Paul the father arranging the mind of his children. In fact, the goal of the letter, chapter 1, verse 10, this appeal that they would be of one mind, the same mind, his mind.

For as he said at the end of chapter 2, he and the apostles have the very mind of Christ. I think it's important for us to see that given the way in which this particular text unfolds, this aim that they would be like Christ.

And what is the goal of every parent? That their children, in some sense, will be like them. They want them all grown up and mature. Therefore, he says, I want you, I appeal to you, I urge you to be imitators of me.

[3 : 49] Which is why I sent you Timothy. So that you will have one in your midst who is like you, my child. Yet faithful is he, and able is he, to teach you and emulate for you, by way of example and word, all that I intend for you in Christ.

The bulk of our text today are those strong words in verses 8 through 13. I've looked at those at length this week and have tried to understand what Paul is doing.

And it seems to me that he is now making an argument for them to grow up based on those things that they valued most.

What did they value in Corinth? They valued the rhetorician's ability to persuade and argue to alter the course of the populace.

And Aristotle is very clear that sarcasm was one of the rhetorical devices that a speaker would use to, in a sense, move his audience, both engage them, hold their interest, and eventually win them.

[5 : 22] So here's Paul, the father, trying to raise his adolescent children in the apostolic gospel. What will be your line of argumentation, Paul?

Well, chapter 1, I will give them an argument from the Bible about how God deals with wisdom. And if they don't hear that, Paul? Well, chapter 3, I intend to give them an argument from my own personal experience.

I will apply these things to myself and to Apollos. Maybe by my experience, they will be one to the right mind. And if they don't hear that, Paul, well, then I'll have nothing left to do but give them an argument along the lines of things that they value.

I will become for them the rhetorician, and I will lay sarcasm on them in a way that will correct them. Isn't that what sarcasm so often does? It's an Irish spring slap in the face.

It's not so much an arm around your shoulder and a word of encouragement as it is two hands, one upon each shoulder, and a look you in the eye. And so it is in verses 7 and following.

[6 : 34] Look at Paul, the way he uses it here. For who sees anything different in you? Again, this sense of what makes you so special? Which I think goes all the way back to chapter 1 in the introduction and verse 1 and following where he says, you are actually part of the churches everywhere.

You don't stand on your own. In fact, what I tell you later in our own verses are the very things I tell all the other churches. What makes you so special, son? Laying it on them thick at the outset.

What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? And with that groundwork laid, he has their attention. And look at what he does here.

These triplets, these rhetorical conventions in threes. These statements, first of all, already you have all you want.

Already you've become rich. Without us, you've become kings. And then here comes the landing. Oh, and would that you did reign so that we might share this rule with you.

[7 : 44] Aristotle makes clear in rhetoric that one better be careful when one uses sarcasm because it is so biting.

You are better as a speaker in the use of this device that you would be the object of what's in play rather than your audience, lest you lose them entirely.

And Paul mirrors that very thing. Look at how he begins to bring himself in as, in a sense, the butt of all his humor.

Verse 9. For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all. Here's the second of three. Like men sentenced to death.

Death. And then the third. Because we've become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. Now this convention would have been very clear to them in language when one took captives, soldiers from war.

[8 : 54] They were led in a train behind all of this great triumphal entry. You would lead your captives behind. Here's Paul. We are at the end of the line.

Sentenced to death. Now coming into the arena and to be judged. And then he moves on from those three to actually three comparisons in verse 10.

We're fools for Christ's sake, but by way of comparison, you're wise. We're weak. You're strong. And here he reverses the order.

You're in honor, but we're in disrepute. Eventually even there, laying himself out as the end of it all. And then this litany of phrases concerning his circumstances.

To this present hour, we hunger and thirst. We're poorly dressed, buffeted, and homeless. And we have to go to work. We labor working with our own hands.

[9 : 51] Again in triplets, when reviled, we bless. When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat. Landing his argument well, we have become, and still are, like the scum of the earth, the refuse of all things.

That's not the way Paul actually felt about himself. This isn't Paul, in some wooden way, actually believing that he's the refuse of the world.

No, he's laid an argument out that says, you know, let me tell you, I know what you value. You value this kind of thing. Well, I will make an argument that is right along the lines of what you value in order to shake you, to bring you back to a way of thinking.

Do you see verse 16? I urge you then, be imitators of me. The same word that he opened with in 110. I appeal to you.

This appeal of a parent for the growth of their child, that they would move from foolish adolescence into mature adulthood.

[11 : 09] And it all hinged on being able to win their mind away from the values of Corinth and in line with the values of Christ.

Like a parent, if that doesn't work, he'll warn them in the end.

Don't you love the strong finish? Some of you are arrogant as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills. And I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people, but their power.

For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power. What do you want? Am I coming to you with a rod? Or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

There were days when my mother would instruct me as a young child to go out to the backyard and pull the actual birch switch off the tree that would be used for my own discipline.

[12 : 10] There were other days where she would say, when I got a little older and had a mind of my own and strength of my own, her only recourse would be, wait till your father gets home.

Well, Paul says, I'm coming home. And I love the way this mirrors last week's text. One of the great warnings he gave last week was this. God is coming.

The Lord Jesus is coming. And He will bring to light things that are hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

Chapter 3 and verse 5. God is coming, in other words. But now He's turned that completely on His head. Its head. He says, You think you've got problems with God? You've got bigger problems than God.

I'm coming. Lord willing. How do you want me to come? Well, what are the lessons for us?

[13 : 12] There's a movement. The values of Chicago and the values of Christ. There's a wisdom according to the world and there's a wisdom in accordance with God.

And these two are on different paths. We value the elevation of ourselves and our connection to those who are in places of power.

And when that creeps into the church, it's a sure sign that we're not adult yet. Maybe not even adolescent. But infants.

So as we come to the close of the first main part of the letter today, let us have the mind of Paul.

The foolishness of the gospel. The proclamation of the cross. And in doing so, may we be raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

[14 : 24] Our Heavenly Father, how quickly we can be pulled to a Corinthian way of thinking and get turned upside down.

Thank you for this letter that squares us up, that keeps us in line with the apostolic gospel, that ensures that we will grow up into the wisdom and stature of Christ, who is our head.

may we then be the fullness of Him who is all in all. Amen. And the