

9. Fools for Christ's sake

July 29, 2018

I often jokingly call junior high students "Half animal and half human," because they are in the period of their life when just about everything they do, think, and speak is influenced by their friends and driven by their own unstable emotions without a thought about their future.

I was one of them a half century ago. During that difficult time, I threw a rock at one of my teacher's home windows one night because he previously slapped across my face hard enough for me to lose my balance for no reason. It was my idea of revenge without thinking of the consequences. Later, my daddy found it out. He didn't whack me, rather he cried. That broke my heart. I've learned a valuable lesson – If I am going to do something bad, don't get caught. No, I learned that my stupidity affected my parents' hearts who loved me and wanted the best for me.

If you are a born-again Christian, you realize that correction doesn't stop with your earthly parents. Our heavenly Father disciplines us so that we can share His holiness, because He loves us and wants the best for us. But, unlike our parents, who may have punished us wrongly at a time, our Lord always chastises us for the right reason, in the right way, at the right time, and to the right degree. He never makes mistakes. And He disciplines us to show His love for us.

Hebrews 12:6 For whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."

With the authority of the apostle of Jesus Christ and the love of their spiritual father, Paul uses his pen as a rod that corrects the wayward Corinthian Christians. We can read the stinging rebuke they received and also see how it may apply to us today.

A. THE SPANKING FOR THE CORINTHIANS

1 Corinthians 4:6b-7 you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. 7 For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

Ever since the post-modern psychologists raddled their mouths about child self-esteem, many of Christian psychologists jumped on their bandwagon. One of the things they rejected was spanking children. They claimed that it destroys the children's self-esteem. But according to the Bible, in the Book of Proverbs, it says otherwise.

Whom should we trust? The Bible or psychologists' mumbo jumbo?

Proverbs 13:24 He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him promptly.

The apostle lands his verbal and spiritual rod on the Corinthians' behind so that they might learn not to think beyond what is written in the Gospel, that none of them may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.

The Corinthian congregation had heard the Gospel from Paul, were saved by Christ the Messiah, and were taught by Paul and Apollos. But they were acting as if their salvation was from being associated with a man, not from God. It is nothing more than a self-glorying pride.

B. A PIERCING REBUKE

1 Corinthians 4:8-13 You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! 9 For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. 10 We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! 11 To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. 12 And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; 13 being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.

The apostle Paul punctures the Corinthians’ inflated egos with piercing irony. Though Paul is using strong sarcasm, his purpose isn’t to make fun of the Corinthian Christians. His purpose is to shake them out of their prideful thinking.

This was the crux of the whole matter: The Christians in Corinth wanted the honor that comes from men, not the honor that comes from God. They were trying to “borrow” glory by associating themselves with “great men.”

There is no place for pride in the ministry and it is a terrible thing in the Christian life and in the church. Church congregation is wrong if they measure their pastors other than by the standards God has given. They are also wrong when they boast about their favorite preachers. This is not to say that faithful servants cannot be recognized and honored, but in all things God must be glorified

In v9, the Greek word for “spectacle” is “theatron,” from which we get our English word “theater.” The image of v9 is from the parade of a conquering Roman general, where he displayed his armies first, the booty second, and at the end of the procession, the defeated captives who would be condemned to die in the arena or sold as slaves.

According to the world’s standard, the apostle Paul was a fool. If he had remained a Jewish rabbi, he could have attained great heights in the Jewish religion. Or had he sided with the Jewish legalists in the Jerusalem church and not ministered to the Gentiles, he could have avoided a great deal of persecution. But the Lord called him to be an apostle for the Savior, everything he had become rubbish.

Philippians 3:8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ

Paul’s description of his own ministry focuses on deprivation and humiliation. Paul does not defend himself by his successes, rather he defends himself by his suffering. These were things that the Corinthian Christians, in their pride, wanted to avoid at all cost.

Today, the church is heavy with this same attitude of the Corinthian Christian who were concerned about the image of worldly success and power, and many of them despised Paul and the other apostles because they did not display that image. Today, there is no shortage of pastors who want to display the image of worldly success and power, and no shortage of Christians who will value that in their pastors.

Please listen to me carefully. Faithfulness in service and humbleness of mind are two important characteristics of a minister of Jesus Christ. He must be willing to work and willing to suffer. It is one thing to be faithful and quite another to be popular.

In their love of Greek wisdom, embraced the Greek idea that manual labor was fit only for slaves and tolerating slander with kindness is beyond their idea. It offended them that one of God's apostles would actually work with his own hands and they thought Paul was a wimp and not worthy of a spiritual teacher.

Here is a term that we are not familiar with "the offscouring of all things." Some ancient Greeks had a custom of casting their idea of worthless people into the sea during a time of plague or famine, while saying, "Be our offscouring!" The victims were called "scrapings" in the belief that they would wipe away the communities' guilt. It was a fancy way of human sacrifice.

C. THE APOSTLE PAUL, THEIR SPIRITUAL FATHER

1 Corinthians 4:14-17 I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. 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. 16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me. 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.

I've never used any type of illegal drugs in my life. Oh, there were plenty of opportunities while I was a fine arts college student. Many of my classmates were into doing marijuana and LSD. So, I have no idea what it is like to get high, but according to those who have used illegal drugs, they said that it was the best feeling until they crashed after effect of the drugs was gone.

But I do know what it is like to have the best feeling without crashing – witnessing to an unbeliever and that person comes to accept Jesus as his Savior and Lord. That is my spiritual high. I feel like I am walking on cloud 9. To some of you, I am your spiritual father, like the apostle Paul was to the Corinthian church congregation.

Paul had a unique place of authority and leadership among the Corinthian Christians, not only because he fathered the church itself in Corinth, but also because of his apostolic authority. We don't have apostolic authority like this. Leading someone to Christ does not give us special authority over their lives, but it does give us a special relationship.

It is important to note that Paul did not take the credit for their conversion. Their spiritual birth was in Christ and through the Gospel. Sinners are born again through the ministry of the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Paul was the "father" who stood by and assisted at their birth.

When I read v16 "*Therefore I urge you, imitate me,*" the first time in late 1980s, I thought Paul was an arrogant snob. How ignorant I was! He could claim that, because he lived as an example to others. Can I say to you guys, "Imitate me?" I wish. But I don't have that kind of example life like the apostle Paul. They didn't have printing back then, Paul couldn't just hand out Bibles. People had to learn the Gospel by watching Paul's life. Maybe that wasn't so bad after all!

We must not think that Paul was exalting himself. Little children learn first by example, then by explanation. When Paul pastored the church in Corinth, he set the example before them in love, devotion to Christ, sacrifice, and service. Paul was a good example because he was following the greatest Example of all, Jesus Christ.

D. I AM COMING TO YOU

1 Corinthians 4:18-21 Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. 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. 20 For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. 21 What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?

Remember after you got into mischief and you got caught. Your mom warned you, "Wait until your dad comes home." You knew that you are going to be a dead meat. The apostle Paul told the mischievous Corinthian Christians that he is coming to discipline them. No one in this congregation was laughing now when Paul's letter was read, because they remember how God moved and performed miracles in his ministry while Paul was with them. Now they are scared.

A faithful parent must discipline one's children. It is not enough to teach them and be an example before them; he or she must also punish them when they rebel and refuse to obey. Paul leaves the ball in their court. There is no doubt Paul would prefer to come in gentleness, but he'll leave that decision up to the Corinthians.

Paul is facing some of the real challenges of ministry – how to confront sin without being too harsh, or implying that you are above sin; how to get people to conform their lives to the Gospel when they think too highly of themselves. This is a great work only by the Holy Spirit can accomplish.

This section prepared the way for the next 2 chapters that deal with discipline in the local church. There was much sin in the Corinthian congregation, and Paul was prepared to deal with it. He had already written them in the previous letter about the matter, but the congregation had not obeyed him. It was then that some of the more spiritual members contacted Paul and shared the burdens with him, and Paul prayed that they might obey the counsel he wrote to them.

It is a principle of life that those who will not govern themselves must be governed. Government authorities, insurance companies, and medical authorities urged drivers not to drink and drive, but many of them refused. So the government passed a law requiring drivers to stay sober while they drive. If you fail to obey, you will be punished.

Paul gave the Corinthian church opportunity to set their household in order. In the following chapters, he explained how the local church ought to be governed in the will of God. Unfortunately, the church did not immediately obey. Paul had to make a quick visit to Corinth, and his experience during that visit was very painful. He then had to write them a very strong letter; possibly it was carried by Titus.

It is not an easy thing to be a representative of Jesus Christ. You must be faithful to your Master no matter what men may say to you or do to you. You will be treated as refuse by the people of the world. Stay focus on Jesus.

E. APPLICATIONS

1) There is no place for pride in the ministry and it is a terrible thing in the Christian life and in the church. Stay humble.

2) It is not an easy thing to be a representative of Jesus Christ. You must be faithful to your Master no matter what men may say to you or do to you. You will be treated as refuse by the people of the world. Stay focused on Jesus.