

**PREFACE**

The accomplished church pianist or organist will supply a few measures of transition from one hymn to the next in the worship service. As the one hymn closes, he will add a measure or two modulating from the first hymn's key to the key of the next hymn. This is an artful, pleasing-to-the-ear way to transition, or segue, from one hymn to the next.

For better than a month, over the last four sessions we have been studying the paragraph just ended: vv8-13. In this paragraph Paul paints a grim picture of the life of an apostle in the first century. He compares them to slaves publicly humiliated as they are marched to their sure death in the arena; he describes them as poor, shabbily dressed, hungry and thirsty, reviled and slandered—even physically persecuted and tortured.

Not surprisingly, we as students of God's word, are nevertheless eager to escape this depressing narrative, and in v14 Paul will begin that extraction. But we need a transition—if the preceding paragraph were a musical composition, we need a few measures to modulate from its discordant minor key to the major key that follows to the end of the chapter. And Paul himself supplies an eloquent segue, or transition, from that paragraph to the next—only it is not found in *this* letter, but in his letter to the Philippian church.

**Read Philipians 4:11-12.**

Here is Paul's modulation from minor to major key, his transition from what on paper sounds like a perfectly miserable existence, to, if not the polar opposite, at least the assurance that he—and, by extension the other apostles and even us—can cope quite well with all that, thank you very much. He declares that he can live—because he has *learned* to live—with whatever the Lord sends his way. And then in v13 he gives the reason.

**Read v13.**

Now we are ready for the next hymn. And as we begin our journey through this next paragraph—which closes the first portion of his letter—I want you to keep two things in mind. First, life in the body of Christ, life in the fullness of God’s economy of the church, means that every one of us is a “Paul,” and every one of us is a “Corinthian.” That is, we cannot rest on the false notion that, *well, I am not a leader in the church, so that doesn’t apply to me.* Nor can we in our pride say, *that doesn’t apply to me because I am not as bad as the Corinthians.* As the apostle uses the word “father” in this next passage, we are each of us both a “father” to be imitated, and someone in need of a “father” to imitate. Every one of us should look to those who exemplify the Christ-life, and every one us should remember that someone out there—even if just one—looks up to *us* as an exemplar of the Christ-life. A sobering contemplation indeed.

Second, this whole paragraph is based on the imagery of family: Paul refers to himself as their “father,” and the Corinthians as his “children.” I don’t know about you, but when I read these sentences I am immediately reminded of something the Lord Jesus said. Didn’t He warn us against doing this?

### **Read Matthew 23:8-10.**

First, Jesus was saying something quite different; his context was one of those who flaunt their positions of authority, reveling in their titles as rabbi, father, or leader; Jesus was not referring to the more family-like situation within the church.

Second, the word Jesus used, *pater*, means father or parent, while the word Paul uses is *egnessa*, which means to procreate, one who begets; in this context we might translate this “spiritual father,” for they became Paul’s “children” through his bringing the gospel of Christ to them. As the KJVs put it in v15, “...for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.” Paul became the instrument through which God gave them new life.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-16.**

v14

After his scathing rhetoric earlier in this chapter, Paul now softens his approach by changing his metaphors, stressing the family connection he has with the Corinthians. And right away we hear a different tone in his voice.

*I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.*

Paul is not averse to shaming errant believers into correct behavior. In fact, later in this letter he will employ this tactic (6:5, 15:34). But here he wants to emphasize the familial connection he has with them.

By even *mentioning* shame, Paul tacitly acknowledges that they *should* have been ashamed of their behavior, but he says that that was not his reason for his earlier remarks. His reason, instead, was to “admonish” them (NASB, ESV)—a much better word than “warn” (NIV, KJVs). An admonition may include warning, but it also includes counsel and appeal; it corrects without “provoking or embittering” (Behm).

This fits perfectly with the familial imagery Paul will employ until the end of the chapter, which he begins with the next phrase, referring to them not as converts or believers or church members, but as “my beloved children.” This term is neither condescending or cynical, but honestly affectionate. This term of endearment had a long history in Judaism, so it would be perfectly natural for Paul to think of them this way. ([More on this in a moment.](#)) As evidence, just a few verses later Paul will refer to Timothy as “my beloved and faithful child in the Lord.” This is how Paul speaks of those to whom he has introduced Christ. See how he speaks of the ex-slave Onesimus to his former master, Philemon.

### Read Philemon 10-16.

#### v15

Even as we use the rich, familial imagery Paul supplies, and from which we might (erroneously) suppose he is exalting himself, we must not lose sight of his overarching purpose and focus.

*Gordon Fee:* Paul’s concern from beginning to end is the gospel... Everything has been said and done for Christ Jesus. He has “fathered” them so that they might be *in Christ Jesus*. He has sent Timothy, who is also his son *in the Lord*, so that they might learn to walk *in Christ Jesus* (v17). This is the point of everything for Paul, and the other details of the argument must never obscure for the later reader that singular passion of his. (italics in original)

With that as his foundational theme in this passage, Paul employs family terms and imagery to make his point—not to promote himself (v16: “be imitators of me”), but to instill the Christ-life in these errant Corinthians.

*For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ...*

The English word “pedagogue” has come to mean a teacher, as in someone who stands in front of a class or single pupil and instructs. But the Greek word—*paidagogos*—from which we get our modern word, does not really mean that. In the first century, a *paidagogos* would be a trusted slave who would conduct a boy—old enough to leave the house, but too young to do so on his own—to and from school, and was generally entrusted with the life and moral upbringing of the youth (an extension of the parent. The *paidagogoi* were very often pictured as stern but not too bright taskmasters wielding a stick or rod on their young charges. ([Young’s Literal Translation: “child-conductors”](#)))

...yet you would not have many fathers,

In v15 Paul is contrasting the temporary, very often bad-intentioned and possibly ignorant “child-conductors,” with the father.

*David Garland:* Disciplinarians are likely to berate them with shaming tactics; a loving father admonishes... Disciplinarians come and go...; the relationship with a father abides.

Paul says that you could “have countless tutors in Christ”—

**Note:** That is the idea here: countless, innumerable. The literal but misleading “ten thousand” in the NIV and KJVs doesn’t quite capture the idea. Modern translation: umpteen zillion, gazillion.

—you could have more *paidagogoi* than you could count, but you would have only *one* father.

*for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.*

Central to everything in the life of Paul is the gospel and Christ Jesus. And here he bookends his statement—“I became your father”—with both.

Over the years I have struggled to settle on the appropriate verb to describe the role of a spiritual “father” (or “mother”; the Greek can refer to either) in the conversion of a nonbeliever into a believer. I think “introduce” works pretty well. At a party or gathering of any kind, when one person introduces an acquaintance to another, he has no say in the relationship that may or may not follow between them. He simply makes the introduction; the rest is up to them. As their “father,” Paul introduced the Corinthians to Christ Jesus through the gospel message. Whether that took root and flowered into an enduring relationship was up to them and the Holy Spirit. (And then, of course, after the introduction takes root, the “father” becomes instructor, admonisher, encourager, and, not least, example.)

*Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.*

What does he want them to imitate? His brilliant mind? His pedigree? His saintly demeanor? His unblemished holiness? No, Paul, in the previous paragraph (vv8-13), has just systematically spelled out what he wants the Corinthians to imitate from his life:

- to be willing to become a fool, a spectacle, even, if God calls them to it, unto death (vv9-10a);
- to be seen by others as weak, and without honor (v10b);
- to be willing to serve Christ hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, even homeless (v11);
- to work to pay one's own way, even while serving others (v12a);
- to answer curses with blessings;
- to answer persecution with acceptance and endurance;
- to answer slander with earnest conciliation (vv12b-13a); and
- to be willing to have others consider you "the scum of the world, the dregs of all things" the lowest of the low (13b).

The Corinthians were preoccupied with the things of this world, its philosophies, its rhetoric, its priorities; they were spending way too much time dwelling on themselves, their societal position, their reputation. To imitate their spiritual "father"—who was imitating Christ (11:1)—they must abandon all that in favor of selfless humility and denial of creature and intellectual comforts.

In this exhortation Paul was simply following the pattern of Christ Jesus. Being a disciple of Christ, a follower of Him, a "Christ-ian," is not a part-time occupation; it is not something one pulls out only when it is convenient. Whether a first-century apostle or a twenty first-century believer, being a Christian means that we are obedient to our Lord's will—even, if it *is* His will, unto death.

### **Read Matthew 16:24-27.**

The cross represented ignominious, tortuous, public death. Nothing could be more alien to the Corinthian culture—even to those in the Corinthian church. Christ's—and Paul's—call is to denial of self, to servanthood, no matter where it takes us.

Let us not be like the recipients of this letter: preoccupied with self, with our standing in the community, with outward appearances, with status.

Let us, instead, be earnestly preoccupied with Christ.