

## Servants of God Making Disciples of Christ

Scripture Text: 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, 10-21

### Introduction

Paul's letter of First Corinthians has much to say about the church, what the church should be, and what it should be doing. Paul wrote this letter to the church in the city of Corinth in ancient Greece. While that church had grown and had many good things happening there, it also floundered under the worldly influences of the city of Corinth and began to divide over various issues. Paul spent more than eighteen months with the Corinthians, so he may have had good reason to expect things to be different than they were. We read in Acts chapter eighteen about the Apostle Paul planting the church in Corinth:

**Acts 18:8-11** <sup>8</sup> "...many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. <sup>9</sup> And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, <sup>10</sup> for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city **who are my people.**" <sup>11</sup> And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them."

There are several things to note about this passage:

- Many in Corinth were God's people
- Paul spent eighteen months with the people of Corinth
- Paul taught the Word of God to them

The church in Corinth started well. It flourished and had evidence of the Spirit of God working there. However, problems developed, such as division, disorder in the worship services, immoral behavior, and theological problems. Some in the church had questioned Paul's authority as an apostle of Christ. Many of the problems within the church in Corinth were no doubt a result of the ungodly influence of the city of Corinth. The city had a reputation for things that were not good. Therefore, Paul took the opportunity to write to the church in Corinth to address these issues.

So far in the letter, we have seen several things God called the church to be and to do. We can summarize it by saying: *The church is a group of people called out of the world by God, into fellowship with Jesus Christ to be God's holy people.* We have also seen several descriptions Paul gave the church: God's building, God's field, and God's temple. Last week we read about three things that Paul said regarding the church:

1. The church should have spiritually mature people who display a growing influence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.
2. The church should not be divided, but it should be united in following Jesus Christ. Jesus is the foundation of the church.
3. The church also is the Temple of God and has God's Spirit dwelling in it.

After Paul mentioned that the Corinthian church is the temple of God and they have the Spirit of God living within them, Paul reminded them again to not boast in men:

**1 Corinthians 3:21–23** <sup>21</sup>...let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, <sup>23</sup> and **you are Christ's**, and Christ is God's.

We all belong to Christ, because we all are following Him, or at least we should be following Jesus. There is no need to boast about anyone: not Paul, not Apollos, not Peter, or anyone else. If we are going to boast about someone, we should boast about Jesus. Whatever the issues, or problems, Paul points the church **back to Christ**. That is a helpful reminder for us as well. Whatever problem or issue we face in the life of the church, we need to always point back to Jesus Christ.

### **Servants of God, Stewards of the Gospel**

Paul began chapter four by telling the Corinthians how they should regard him, and other ministers to the church. Paul reminds them again who he was:

- A **Servant** of Christ
- A **Steward** of the mysteries of God

Whatever the Corinthians may have thought of Paul, he served Jesus Christ. Paul was serving and obeying God by planting the church in Corinth. Paul was serving Jesus Christ by ministering to them and caring for them. If some people in the church had a problem with Paul or thought they should follow him or someone else, Paul reminded them that he was serving Christ, **and so should they**. The Apostle Peter gave us a similar reminder:

**1 Peter 2:16** [Live] as servants of God.

That was Paul's life – one who served God. Paul also told them that he was a “steward of the mysteries of God.” A steward is someone who manages the affairs of someone else. By referring to the “mysteries of God” I believe Paul is primarily referring to the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, and maybe other things that God has now revealed to us through the Holy Spirit. God entrusted the gospel to Paul so that he would preach it to the world and make disciples for God's kingdom. The church should have regarded Paul and any other minister as a servant of God. All ministers, all Christians, are servants of God and stewards of the gospel.

Paul also referred to himself as something else, something not very flattering. Not only did he say he was a servant of God and a steward of God's gospel, in verse ten, Paul said he was also a “**fool for Christ**”. If Paul were here with us today, he might say he was a **Jesus freak**. You know, those people walking around with the long hair,

a beard and sandals preaching from the streets, “Jesus saves”. We should all be that committed to Christ. Nothing else matters except Jesus Christ. But, Paul has something particular in mind here by calling himself a fool for Christ. He describes just how “foolish” he was for Jesus.

**1 Corinthians 4:11–13** <sup>11</sup> To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and [beaten] and homeless, <sup>12</sup> and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; <sup>13</sup> when slandered, we [respond graciously]. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Paul hungered and thirst, he was poorly clothed, he was beaten, and he was homeless...yet, he still preached the good news of Jesus Christ. Why do people continue to serve Jesus when they endure so much hardship? Why do missionaries go to foreign lands to endure suffering and persecution, and sometimes face death? They do it because they are serving someone and doing something greater than themselves. To the world, this looks foolish. They are “fools for Christ.” Paul was working to build God’s kingdom, to build up of God’s church, God’s people. When he was insulted, he blessed; when he was slandered, he was gracious and friendly; when he was persecuted, he continued the course and endured the hardship. Paul was a servant of God and a steward of the Gospel. And we should be as well!

### **Paul, a Spiritual Father**

One of Paul’s goals in writing this letter was to remind the Corinthian church that he was an apostle of Christ, a servant of Christ. But, Paul was something else, also.

**1 Corinthians 4:15** <sup>15</sup> For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers.

Paul tells the church that they have countless guides, but not many fathers. What is the difference between a guide and a father? A guide will tell you how to do something or how to get somewhere. But that is it. A guide shares information but a **father shares his life**. In the Corinthian culture, guides were hired tutors bound to their students by money. You would pay someone to be your guide, to teach you. But fathers were leaders bound to their children **by love**. Fathers have a relationship with their children that guides do not. Paul was not talking about biological fathers, the male parents in their lives. You know, those men who raise you and spank you and tell you not to do something...or else. Those who help you ride your first bike, learn to swing and protect you. Paul was not writing about them. He was writing about **spiritual fathers**.

Paul was called to the church to preach the gospel through **close, intimate relationships**. Paul was not trying to just pass some spiritual information to the Corinthians. He was not just trying to teach them spiritual truths, though that is important. He was a spiritual father to them. The Corinthians had many guides and

teachers, some which were probably not that good. The Corinthian church had been focused more on people and what these people taught, rather than being mentored by people, fathered by Christians who really spent time with them. We need people who nurture our faith in Christ. Like a father, Paul cared for the Corinthian church in a special way. Like a father, Paul desired what was best for the church and wanted it to succeed. He loved them and cared for them, like a father would for his family. A spiritual father (or mother) is someone who takes responsibility for someone's spiritual growth. Instead of looking to countless guides for information, disciples should seek out (and eventually become) fathers and mothers who disciple people.

**1 Corinthians 4:14-15** For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, **be imitators of me.**

Paul admonished the church like beloved children, like parents who warn their children about things they should or shouldn't do. Because Paul was their spiritual father, he urged the Corinthians **to imitate him**. A disciple is not simply a student. A student learns what a teacher teaches. A disciple learns what a teacher lives. When discipling others, we must be present in a disciple's life but also intentional in pointing him/her to Christ. We must exude Christ in our lives, not simply pass knowledge to another. As spiritual fathers and mothers, we must care for others through intentional, loving, Christ-exalting relationships. The church needs gospel truth with real, personal relationships.

But, what do we do about Paul's statement to **imitate him**? Does imitating Paul contradict following Christ? Can we imitate someone, a spiritual father or mother, and still claim to follow Christ? I think so. If a spiritual father or mother discipled correctly, he or she will point disciples to Christ. He or she will model Christ-like behavior in such a way that always points back to Jesus Christ. It is not about following a church leader or anyone else, it is about **being an example of Jesus and following Him**. Recognizing God has appointed leaders in the church for their good, believers should search for spiritual mentors, in the gospel. These gospel mentors help us grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. God has designed the Christian life so that much of our spiritual growth comes by imitating other Christians, imperfect though they are.

We must teach the truth of God's Word, but we must also teach Christ-like living by example. As we lovingly instruct younger believers in the way of godliness and live Christ-like lives, they will grow in Christlikeness by imitating our life and teaching. Think of Timothy, who was a spiritual child of Paul. Paul told Timothy the following:

**1 Timothy 4:12** ...be an **example** to believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

Be an example! In a sense, discipling is simply friendship with a Christ-ward direction. In discipling, we befriend others in order to grow in Christlikeness and to help them grow in Christlikeness.

### Practical Discipling

Jesus said, “Go. Make disciples.” This means we have to get out there, amongst our church family, our family, our friends, our community and intentionally get involved in other’s lives. Discipling is not some program the church has. It is not something that is occasional or out of the ordinary. To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Christ. And being a disciple of Christ means:

- Looking to others for help in being like Christ (to be a disciple);
- Looking to help others be like Christ (to disciple).

Therefore, churches should view **discipling as a lifestyle**. It should be a natural part of being a Christian and a part of God’s church. It is what one who follows Christ does. Think of it in this way: the church should be a well-trained volunteer firefighter unit. I think that analogy sticks because we are very much fighting spiritual fires. Fighting spiritual battles takes more than one or two paid firefighters, but a whole team of spiritual firefighters. I am going to provide a list that I found in a journal by 9 Marks ministry that I hope provides some practical ways to **become a disciple** and **to disciple others**. This assumes that you are a believer and have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

1. If you are not an active member of a church, then join a Bible-believing group of people who are following Jesus Christ. **Be with God’s people.**
2. **Practice hospitality** with others. A whole lot can be said about just being nice and friendly with each other.
3. **Spend time** with people outside of the church. Have breakfast, lunch, or some other type of get-together. If you and the individual share a pastime, like football, look for ways to share that pastime together.
4. Pray to God for **strategic friendships**, for God to bring the right people into your life and to put you in the life of someone else.
5. **Get to know someone.** Ask them about their parents, spouse, children, testimony, job, walk with Christ, and so on. Be genuinely interested in them.
6. **Share yourself.** Discipleship is about relationships. It isn’t just about passing information to another. Build that relationship with another.
7. Look for ways to have **spiritual conversations**. Maybe decide to read the Bible or some other Christian literature together. Ask them what they are reading, particularly the Bible. Share things that God has revealed to you from Scripture.
8. Don’t forget about their **physical or material needs**. Do they need your help in some way? How can you meet a particular need they have. People will become a part of your life when they know you genuinely care about them.

9. Invite the person to **visit you at home** or spend time with your family. Let them watch you live your life.
10. **Pray with them** and let them know you are praying for them.

## Conclusion

Discipleship is an ordinary, intentional, relationship-building part of the church. Do we favor teaching and instruction, maybe a sermon once a week, over “fatherly” imitation? To be truthful, I am guilty of this. Sometimes, I believe I can just get the facts, just the facts, as Sgt. Joe Friday supposedly said. Maybe I can just read a book, listen to a sermon, even read the Bible, without real relationships with other Christians. That is just not how we are intended to become disciples. That is not how God intended the church to be. Jesus taught the Word, but he came down and got involved in people’s lives. He ate dinner with people. He attended weddings. He held large “miraculous” feasts. He spent time with his disciples.

People need to see the gospel lived out in the daily lives of spiritually mature believers. They need our bodily presence, faults and all. Disciples need encouragement and correction from living, breathing spiritual mentors. We all need spiritual fathers and mothers to help us imitate Jesus. Paul was a spiritual father to the Corinthian church. He cared for them as a father would his children. We, too, should build those relationships with one another, being spiritual fathers and mothers and being disciples who imitate Christ-like believers. Serve God. Share the Gospel. Make Disciples. That’s the church’s mission. That’s our mission. May it be so.