

A Genuine Servant of Christ

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

Key Verse: 4:15-16

“Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me.”

We hear news of servants of Christ almost daily. Pope Benedict XVI is visiting the United States. His message yesterday called for purification and healing in the Catholic Church. We have heard about Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Senator Barack Obama’s former pastor. He made some negative proclamations about America. In contrast, there is Pastor Joel Osteen, the smiling pastor, who brings a positive message to millions. Are they all genuine servants of Christ? What makes one a genuine servant of Christ? How can we be genuine servants of Christ? Today Paul reveals distinctive elements that mark genuine servants of Christ. Let’s consider three of them.

First, the genuine servant of Christ is a faithful Bible teacher (1-7).

Let’s read verse 1. “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.” Why does Paul say this? As we have studied, the Corinthians had been disputing about which servant of Christ was the greatest. They saw the servants of Christ as servants of the church. Then the elders, deacons and members judged them, like those who fill out customer satisfaction surveys. However, their attitude was not right. Servants of Christ are servants of Christ, not of the church. Christ is the one who chose, equipped and sent them. The Corinthians should receive them as Christ’s servants, respect them, and listen to them.

Christ entrusts his servants with the secret things of God. What are they? One great secret is the message of the cross. To those who repent and believe, it is the power and wisdom of God for salvation. But to the worldly, it is foolishness. They don’t know the secret. The kingdom of God is another secret (Mk 4:11). God’s world salvation plan is also a secret (Eph 3:6). These secrets must be revealed by God. God reveals them to those who study the Bible diligently, like those seeking hidden treasure (Mt 13:44). Therefore, servants of Christ study the word of God until they find the secrets of God. These servants know Christ intimately through his word and Spirit. They know the mind of Christ. They reveal Christ through Bible teaching.

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Let's read verse 2 together. "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." To a servant of Christ, faithfulness is the most important quality. It is not handsomeness, intelligence, wit, or eloquence, but faithfulness. Sometimes faithful people do not seem to be so smart. One Russian man drove a water-sprinkling machine to control dust on dirt roads. He did this without fail, even on rainy days. He was faithful, if not so sharp. Servants of Christ must be doggedly faithful in teaching the Bible. They must deliver the Lord's message as of first importance. They must share the message as it is, without changing the contents to suit their own feelings or purpose. They must share the message when and where Christ wants them to. When the Lord says, "go," they go. When the Lord says, "stay," they stay. Paul proved himself faithful. He stayed in Corinth according to the Lord's command even though he suffered much (Ac 18:9-11). Then there was a great harvest of souls and the Corinthian church was born. If Paul had not stayed, what would have happened? Two weeks ago, God called Shepherd Moses Kim to heaven. He was a faithful man. Two times during the last 40 years, there were painful divisions in UBF in Korea. Both times, Shepherd Moses Kim was faithful to God's mission, to God's servant Dr. Lee, and to God's sheep, though it was costly. When he was young, he served a student meeting on the top floor of the highest building on campus. It was the equivalent of thirty stories high. Sometimes he went up and down ten times in a meeting. But he never complained. He said, "I became healthy."

We must value faithfulness most. We must thank God for faithful Bible teachers like Missionary Isaac Choi and our volunteer CBF teachers, and Missionaries Hosea and Annie Lee who lead 12 one-to-one Bible studies weekly. We must pray to be faithful to Christ. Christ said, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev 2:10b).

However, when one faithfully preaches the gospel, the response is not usually widespread acceptance, but criticism, judgment and condemnation. In verses 3-4, Paul tells us to care "very little" about the judgments of others. There may be a grain of truth in their criticism that will help us improve our character or way of ministry. However, servants of Christ must not care much about human judgments. Paul also tells us that he did not judge himself. That does not mean that he did not evaluate himself, for he surely did that. Paul did his best in serving Christ and allowed his conscience to guide him in observing an exemplary work ethic, striving for excellence. But he knew that his best was not good enough. What mattered was whether Christ was pleased or not. Like Abel in Genesis, Paul offered his best to God as one who needed mercy, trusting God's grace to accept and bless his offering. If God was pleased, Paul was happy, no matter what men

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might say (5). If God was not pleased, Paul was most sorry, no matter how much praise he might receive from men. Only God's judgment really matters.

In verse 6, Paul emphasizes, "Do not go beyond what is written." Servants of Christ faithfully proclaim the message of Christ based on the Bible—nothing more, nothing less (6). Members of the body should accept it humbly and come to Christ. Christ is the center. We must all grow in Christ. Christ changes us through his word (7). This is solely Christ's grace. We must recognize his grace. Then we can be thankful, humble, and united in his love.

Let's read verse 2 again. "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." We have received the secret of the gospel of Christ. It is nothing but the grace of Christ and it is a sacred trust. We must prove faithful to Christ and his purpose by sharing the gospel with others as God gives us opportunity, especially through one-to-one Bible study. May God help each of us to be faithful Bible teachers for the glory of Christ.

Second, the genuine servant of Christ participates in Christ's suffering (8-13).

In verse 8a, Paul rebukes the Corinthians with biting hyperbole. He says, "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us!" The Corinthian Christians thought that they were already glorified, sitting on thrones like kings, sharing the power and reign of Christ. They looked down on others and judged others, even the servants of God. Their concept of serving Christ was worldly. They thought it meant having power and glory in this world. To correct them, Paul explained that in reality, servants of Christ suffer a lot for God's glory.

Look at verse 9. "For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men." Paul had in mind the victory processions of Roman conquerors, as we can see in the classic movies "Ben-Hur," and "Quo Vadis." (Show video clip on screen.) Leading the procession was the conquering general in a golden chariot with attendants and entourage. He was followed by soldiers in shining armor, marching smartly. At the very end of the procession were prisoners of war, who were jeered and spit upon and beaten, as they headed to the arena to be fed to the lions. In terms of this procession, the Corinthians thought they were in the place of the conquering general. But Paul said that apostles are like the men at the end of the procession. They suffer much and die in the most humiliating circumstances. Paul said in verses 12-13, "We work

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hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.” God puts his servants in such circumstances to reveal the character of Christ and the glory of God through their sufferings. That is why genuine servants of Christ are willing to participate in the suffering of Christ.

Horace G. Underwood, of the famous Underwood typewriter family, went to Seoul, Korea as a missionary in 1885. He was a very able man—a Princeton graduate who could speak eight languages. However, when he decided to go to Korea as a missionary, his fiancée broke their engagement. At age 26, with a broken heart, Underwood went to Korea. After four years on the mission field, he married Miss Horton, who was eight years older than him. He married by faith, for the mission. They traveled to northern Korea to preach the gospel and minister to suffering people. There were many dangers and hardships. What is more, in northern Korea, they became spectacles to the natives. Wherever they went, native people gathered to observe them, saying, “They look so strange! Are they human beings? Their eyes are blue! Can they see with blue eyes?” The Underwoods became like monkeys in the zoo. However, in this way the gospel spread throughout Korea. Theirs is not a story of riches, fame and success, but of hardship, misunderstanding and suffering. A true servant of Christ will have a resume of sufferings more than of worldly honors.

Third, the genuine servant of Christ is a spiritual father (14-21).

Though Paul’s words to the Corinthians were sharp, they were not intended to shame them, but to warn them (14). Paul spoke to them as his own dear children whom he wanted to correct for their good. Let’s read verse 15 together. “Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.” In what respect was Paul their spiritual father?

In the first place, Paul participated in their birth through the gospel. It was through Paul’s Bible teaching that the word of God came into their hearts and gave them new life. God chose to work through Paul by his sovereign will and one-sided grace. Just as physical children do not choose their birth parents, spiritual children do not choose their birth parents. God chooses them. God gives them life according to his own sovereign will. Children should respect their spiritual parents out of reverence for God.

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In my own experience, there have been moments when my spiritual father's words turned me around 180 degrees. Last year at this time, Dr. Abraham Kim, my spiritual father at birth, encouraged me to go to graduate school. I am busy enough to serve Chicago UBF and North America. I have six children who need my care. I turn 50 later this year. So my immediate response was "No." But Dr. Kim's words reverberated in my heart. I prayed sincerely for God's leading. Then, with the blessing of Gods' servants, and the support of my wife, I entered the masters program in Evangelism and Leadership at Wheaton College. Now I am almost half done. It has enlarged my intellectual and spiritual capacity. I have made friends with excellent Christian leaders. God establishes a special relationship between spiritual fathers of birth and children. We do well to listen to them.

In the second place, Paul's relationship with them was like that of a father and his children. For eighteen months Paul endured many hardships to support himself and also provide spiritual food for the Corinthians. He had gone through birthpains, and babysat them, and protected them, until the tender roots of the gospel could grow strong and healthy in them. Here we can see that Paul had been greatly changed in Christ. At one time, Paul was a strict and legalistic Pharisee who would not tolerate shortcomings. But now he was a loving father who embraces and patiently endures immature children. It was because he knew the heart of God. God is a Father to weak and vulnerable human beings. Jesus taught us to call God "Father" in the Lord's Prayer. God loves us like a father. God's love for us is unconditional, sacrificial, everlasting and longsuffering. God loves us so much that he gave his one and only Son Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement to save us from our sins. God is patient with sinners in the hope that we may repent and grow and have a healthy love relationship with him. God pours out his grace upon us day after day, though we don't understand it or deserve it. In this way, God wants to raise us as holy children. When Paul knew God's heart, he could be a spiritual father to the Corinthians.

God used Dr. Samuel Lee as a spiritual father. In the early 1970's, many young Korean nurses in Germany began to believe the gospel through UBF missionaries. Dr. Lee left Korea, and his growing family and ministry, and spent three months in Germany teaching the Bible. One night, he heard that his precious youngest daughter, now Missionary Little-Sarah Kim, had pneumonia. Dr. Lee shed many tears. Then he realized that as he loved his daughter, God loved the Korean nurses. He began to serve each of them with a father's heart, and many could establish fruitful house churches.

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Many years later, Missionary Little-Sarah Kim cared for Joseph Grady with the heart of a parent. When she first saw Joe, he looked emotionless and lifeless. Both his father and his stepfather had died young. Joe had to be responsible for his younger siblings in their father's place, and he missed his own adolescence. Outwardly, he had a father's responsibility; inwardly he had a boy's emotions. He grew bitter toward God. Through faithful Bible study he accepted God's love through John 3:16. He became a virtual member of the Kim family. He grew through various kinds of training: faithful testimony writing and sharing to be rooted in God's word; violin and drama performance to overcome self-consciousness; caring for CBF kids to learn servanthship; and using his administrative skills to serve the fellowship and Chicago ministry at large. He grew miraculously. Still, there was an obstacle. Joe had a fear of marriage. Through much prayer support from his spiritual family, he overcame and married Faith by faith on May 6, 2006. He has lived as a man of mission at UIC, and a patient husband, supporting one full time shepheress. God works through those with the heart of a spiritual parent.

There is a contrast in verse 15 between spiritual fathers and guardians. Fathers care for their children out of love. Guardians serve them to make money. It is similar to the contrast Jesus makes between the good shepherd and the hired hand (Jn 10). Do you know why the hired hand takes care of the sheep diligently? It is to get their wool. What is our motive in serving God's sheep? Is it to gain wealth or honor for ourselves? We must love God's children with pure hearts as a spiritual father, and give glory to God.

In the third place, Paul was a father worth imitating. He said in verse 16, "Therefore I urge you to imitate me." Not all fathers can say this. If Paul was a chronic gambler or an alcoholic, it would be better not to say, "imitate me." Yet Paul could say, "imitate me." In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul said, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." Especially, Paul wanted them to learn Jesus' humbleness. This would solve their problem of arrogance and enable them to love one another from the heart.

To help them remember his example, Paul sent Timothy to them. Timothy had learned Christ's humility and faithfulness from Paul. Timothy loved God's children purely (Php 2:20). Timothy's real and living example would help them glimpse the universal love of Christ, as it was practiced throughout the world. Paul also wanted to come to them. If necessary, he would bring his whip (21). Paul's fatherly love included training in the truth. He would not avoid painful encounters if it helped his children spiritually.

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Today we learned how to recognize and how to be genuine servants of Christ. It is not easy. But when we pray, God will help us. Especially, let's pray to have a spiritual father's heart like Apostle Paul.