



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

1 Corinthians 4:14-21

1 Corinthians

“A Belief that Behaves”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are in a series of studies in 1 Corinthians, and this morning we’re going to finish up chapter 4. We’ll look at verse 14 through 21. Paul has been giving a very serious description of the church and its problems; in fact, his tone has been described by some as being sarcastic. That’s maybe a little harsh for Paul, because that can be interpreted as being kind of a cruel description. He’s not that, but he has been at least ironical with them, and he’s been very firm in his criticism.

And so we read now in verse 14 of chapter 4.

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

For if you have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.

For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.

Now some have become 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 words of those who are arrogant but their power.

For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.

What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, it’s a blessing to be with your people on this Lord’s Day. It’s an opportunity for us to fellowship, genuinely fellowship with one another in your Word, and that’s what we will do. We will think together about the things we’ve read, and hopefully, by your grace, we will be built up in the faith. And I say by your grace because we are totally dependent upon you for that. You’ve blessed us greatly. We’ll even consider this in our lesson.

You’ve blessed us with a new nature; every believer in Jesus Christ is born again. We have a new heart. We have new spiritual faculties. We have the ability to see the light, to understand things, and yet those faculties, that new mind, can only function as the Spirit enables it. As he enables us to understand, as he illuminates our minds, as he shines his light on the Scriptures, can we understand your Word, can we understand the things that we’ve just read.

And so we come before you humbly, recognizing our complete dependence upon you, even in this reborn, regenerated condition that you have given to us; completely dependent upon you for our understanding of the things we’ve read, and how they apply to us. And they apply perhaps differently to each one of us, because we’re at different places in life. We have different issues, different struggles. Some of us may not seem to have struggles, and yet, well, there’s a struggle in that.

There’s a struggle with gratitude. There’s a struggle with pride. There’s a struggle with a sense of false confidence. And yet others are in great need, obvious need, and so our problems are different. Our issues are different and you know all of them, and I pray, Father, that you’d shine your light, so to speak, upon us, and put your finger, so to speak, on our problems, and give us a sense of them and the answer to them in your Word, and how this text applies to it all.

Teach us, encourage us where we need encouragement, admonish us where we need admonishing, correct us, build us up in the faith. Lord, we pray that this will be a profitable time together spiritually. We pray that for our meeting this evening as we come together again and celebrate the Lord and his death for us, and his coming again, and what he’s doing presently, sitting on the throne at your right hand, interceding for us, guiding us.

We are blessed people, Father, and I pray that you’d give us a sense of that in this hour, and then again this evening. Bless us spiritually, but Lord, we are people with material needs as well, and Mark has mentioned some of those, and we do pray

for those who have asked our request. We can’t go through the whole list, but Father, exercise each one of us to do that during the week; to pray for those who’ve asked for our prayers. And Lord, we thank you for all that we have.

We have much; we have far more than we really realize, and we give you praise and thanks for it, and pray you bless us now as we continue with our worship. And bless our time of study and learning, and we pray that in all that we do, we would honor you and bring glory to you. We pray these things in Christ’s name. Amen.

[Message] As I look over the congregation, I can see that most of you are either parents or will be parents, so you know or will someday learn that parenting involves teaching your children right from wrong – no surprise there. But what every thoughtful parent must consider is what is the best way to motivate his or her child to good behavior? Is it the stick or the carrot? Is it punishment or reward? Both are necessary, but it’s a wise parent who knows which should be used.

Paul was thinking about that. He considered the Corinthians his children, and they were behaving badly. So at the end of chapter 4, he asks them how they wanted him to deal with them. Did they want him to come to them with a rod or a reward; with a stick or a carrot? Now, much of the book of 1 Corinthians is about that kind of thing. Much of it is about correcting bad behavior. It has some important passages on doctrine. Paul always taught doctrine, but for Paul right thinking was never enough.

The gospel must result in right behavior. For him, and in all of Scripture, conduct must be consistent with creed. I have a book at home titled *A Belief that Behaves*. It’s a good title. It’s an important truth; in genuine Christianity, belief and behavior always go together. When they don’t, there must be correction, just as a parent must correct a child. That’s what Paul was doing. He’s been doing that. Our text, the last paragraph of chapter 4, brings to a close a long opening section of the letter which has to do with factions in the church. The church was divided by rivalry.

It happened because the Corinthians were enamored of the wisdom of the world. They were enamored with the way the world did things; the standards of the world, the goals of the world, the things that the world admired; eloquence in speaking, style over substance, interesting philosophy. All of that fascinated them, and so they had chosen a human outlook on life, and preferred the world’s wisdom over Christ’s wisdom. So as a result of that – things we think affect the things that we do.

As a result of that, they were proud, and they were judgmental. Paul has responded vigorously to that, and he’s given them a very unflattering picture of their church. One writer said, “It would have made a Corinthian with any humanity blush.” I suppose it did, particularly after what he said in chapter 4. But when he comes to the end of it, when he comes to verse 14 and he concludes his correction, he softens his tone. Paul exchanges the stick for a carrot. He tells them he wasn’t trying to embarrass them.

“I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children.” Paul was simply making them look at themselves, like a mother might do when she makes her son look into the mirror to see the mess all over his face. And what the Corinthians saw was a mess. So there was a sense in which Paul was trying to shame them – he was trying to shame some sense into them, not maliciously, but lovingly, as for his own children. He considered them to be that, so he considered them to be their spiritual father – considered himself to be that.

He says that in verse 15 – in order to show his concern for them; to show that he had the concern of a loving parent. “For if you have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.” Paul had a unique relationship with the Corinthians, and he wasn’t suggesting by this that as their father he had brought them into the family of God, that he had caused their new birth or anything like that.

He’s not suggesting that he had any special power or any special authority as such that affected their conversion or had some hold over them. And he’s really careful to eliminate any suggestion of that by stating that he became their spiritual father through the gospel. They became a new creation through the gospel. Paul was just the person who delivered the life-changing message. The power – and there’s real power – but that power is in the Word. It’s in the Word of God.

It’s alive. It’s powerful. It’s sharper than any two-edged sword. It’s in the Word. It’s not in the person. But as the person who first preached the gospel to them, and did so at great sacrifice to himself – great difficulty, suffering for them – he had a unique place in their lives. He had a special relationship to them. He was their spiritual father. Now, they might’ve had many tutors or guardians, but he says they had only one father. In the Roman world, the tutor or guardian was a very familiar person.

He was usually a slave, very trusted slave in the family – usually a patrician family, a noble family, a wealthy family. And the father would put this trusted slave in charge of

his children, specifically, especially his sons, or his son. And this person, the *paidagōgos*, the tutor, would manage all of the affairs of the child’s life; ensure that he got up on time, he would get him to and from school on time. He’d make sure that he did all of his lessons, made his bed, ate his spinach – everything.

He controlled his life. He had authority over the child. But his authority could never equal that of his father. A child might even have many guardians, many tutors, but would always have only one father; could only have one father. And while the Corinthians might have many teachers and spiritual leaders, and many good ones, like Apollos and Peter, they would always have only one Paul – one father. That was a reminder, first, that Paul had the moral authority to correct them, and the wisdom to do it. He was their father. They were his children.

But secondly, it reassures them that he cared for them more than anyone else in the world. He was their father, and like a good father, he would provide for them. He would keep them safe. This past week was the 50th anniversary of the publication of a modern classic, *To Kill A Mockingbird*. It was published in July 11, 1960. The main character in the book is Atticus Finch, a Southern lawyer, who pursued justice regardless of the outcome. He was a model man. But he’s also a father, and as much as anything, the book is about that.

All through the story he gives his two children the wisdom of his counsel and example. The last scene is at night, and Atticus is at the bedside of his injured son. The last sentence in the book is “He would be there all night, and he would be there when Jim waked up in the morning.” That’s a father. He’s reliable. He loves his children, and he stays with them. That was Paul for the Corinthians. He would sit by the bed till morning, if necessary. He would be with them. He would protect them.

But because he was a father to them, he would correct them, because the best thing for them was for their behavior to match their belief. But he preferred to do it with some gentle persuasion; rather use the carrot than the stick. He wants to motivate them, rather than scare them. And so in verse 16, the method of persuasion he uses to inspire good behavior is his own example. He says, “Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me.” A child should share the likeness of his parents, and especially in this context, in this verse, the likeness of his father.

So Paul was using that logic, basically saying, “As your father, look like me.” In other words, “Behave like me. Be imitators of me.” It’s a logic that today seems a little

odd, I suppose, to some people. We live in a place and a time that values rugged individualism; that’s typically American. People take pride in being different, in being their own man, their own person, being nonconformist. I like that line from Thoreau about being out of step with others because they hear a different drummer.

I remember years ago studying Henry David Thoreau in school, and even visiting Walden Pond outside of Boston, where Thoreau retreated, lived off the land, and meditated. I think he wrote that line about the drummer while he was at Walden Pond. I was a tourist, not a pilgrim. That was in the late ’60s, when it was considered fashionable to be unfashionable; to be counter-culture and a revolutionary. That’s not Christianity. Christianity is about conformity.

It is about becoming like Christ, and Paul was counseling the Corinthians to follow his example in following Christ’s example; conform to him. And the irony is that by conforming to Christ, we become the only real non-conformists in the world. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul gives that exhortation to us. He urges us, “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed.” We are to be in this world, but not of this world. We are to present our bodies, he says, “as a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God.”

Every day our life is to be laid on the altar to God. We are to be a living and holy sacrifice to him, conforming to the image of Jesus Christ, not this world. Now, that’s what he is saying here. He wanted them to take him as their model, to follow his values, to take his attitude toward the world, adopt his priorities, and make the gospel the center of their lives, the center of everything they did – the center of their lives personally, the center of the life of their church, so that they would have a true influence on that pagan city of Corinth.

They’d be light in the midst of that darkness. Well, that’s what he’s saying, and all of that is contained – and really much more – in that little phrase “imitators of me.” And that’s saying, really, not only a lot, but really more than he could explain in one letter. So in verse 17, he tells them that he was sending Timothy to them to explain things in more detail. He calls Timothy “my beloved and faithful child in the Lord.” It’s the same description that he gave of them – almost the same description.

They are beloved, and they are children, but here he adds something about Timothy that he didn’t add about them, and that is that he’s a faithful child. Now, that wasn’t written as a subtle rebuke to the Corinthians; it was stated as a genuine praise of Timothy. But that is what God desires in his servants, in his people, and that’s what they lacked – faithfulness.

Faithfulness is not only loyalty to doctrine, but loyalty in practice. It embraces both creed and conduct. And Paul was sending Timothy especially to explain Paul’s conduct.

Paul calls it “my ways.” My paths, in other words; the paths that I follow in life; the course of my life – there’s more than one. It’s plural, so there are different ways in which we respond to different circumstances, and it’s wisdom and knowledge that enables us to take the right path in life and to do the right thing. And so he’s going to send Timothy there to explain Paul’s life, to elaborate on how the doctrines of Scripture influence the conduct of life, and that is an important point to make.

Christian doctrine has implications for our lives and how we live, and we’ll see that particularly later on. You come to chapter 15 and there is a great chapter on doctrine. It’s all about the resurrection. The situation in Corinth was they believed that Christ had been raised from the dead bodily, but they didn’t think that they themselves would be raised from the dead. That was something they didn’t want, at least according to Greed philosophy, and some of the teaching, evidently, of that that had filtered into the church.

That the body is something bad; it’s actually the prison of the soul, and you want to be free of that. The soul is like a bird, the body like a cage, and at death the soul escapes this cage. We don’t want to be raised, but Paul has to correct all of that. There’s no resurrection of the body of us, then Christ wasn’t raised, and if he wasn’t raised, there’s no forgiveness and we have no hope. And so he spends 58 verses in that chapter on the resurrection. It’s the last verse, verse 58, that is the application.

There he says, “Therefore” – that is, in light of everything that I’ve told you about the resurrection, Christ’s resurrection, your resurrection, the necessity of it, and what it’s going to be. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.” The certainty of our future resurrection influences our daily life. Be immovable in your conviction, and active in your service, in light of all of that.

Because we are eternal, everything we do has value and importance, and will last. Everything the world does is smoke. Everything we do in Christ is gold, because of the resurrection, because of the eternal destiny that we have. And so live in light of that, and the point is simply to say that Christian doctrine has implications for our lives right now. Now the Corinthians knew some doctrine, but they hadn’t made the connection between truth and life; some of them hadn’t. And I suspect many Christians today haven’t.

Don Carson gave an example of this from the seminary where he taught. He told of the student who was about to graduate, but had decided not to go into the ministry. He was a good student, but he hadn’t put things together. He understood some doctrine. He could explain propitiation, but he didn’t know what it felt like to be forgiven. He could define holiness, but rather than really pursuing holiness, he was really just practicing a kind of rigid discipline. He knew he’s missing something, and he didn’t feel he could minister.

So a faculty member took some time with him and he explained the basics. He took the student back to the cross; that’s the place where we always have to begin. Go back to the cross. And Dr. Carson says “work forward from that point.” The student began to understand when he got a glimpse of grace, when he got a glimpse of the love of God for him, Dr. Carson said, he wept and wept. Today he’s in the ministry. He connected grace to his own life. He understood what Christ had come for him, what the triune God had done for him.

And Timothy was a man like that – he was a man who’d made the connection between faith and practice, and understood Paul’s ways, and they were his own ways. He imitated the apostle. But again, what that really means is he was faithful to Christ. That’s Paul’s point. He means “imitate me in that I imitate Christ.” And so Timothy did; he didn’t compromise his teaching. They were compromising the gospel in Corinth. They were embarrassed about it; the cross is the stumbling block. It’s an embarrassment to people.

The Gentiles would mock it. It wasn’t a message that was popular there among the philosophers and the pagans of Corinth, and they wanted to modify it a bit to make it more palatable for their neighbors. They were compromising. Timothy wasn’t doing that. He didn’t compromise his teaching. He wasn’t ashamed of the cross. Christ was the center and priority of his lives, so he lived what he taught. He was patient with others, and he sacrificed for them, as Christ had sacrificed for him. He served others as Christ served him.

It’s an amazing thought, is it not, when you think that Christ is the eternal Son of God, very God of very God. The one who created each one of us; the one who holds us all together, the one who’s carrying history along, and he serves us. He’s the suffering servant. His work on the cross is finished, but he sits at the right hand of the Father, praying for each and every one of us constantly, concerned for us, as concerned as a loving father is for his son or his daughter. Now, that thought instilled within Paul and Timothy a desire to emulate that and serve others.

If he serves me in that sense, my God and Creator, then should I not serve his people as well? And they were doing that. Paul valued that in Timothy, and so did the Lord. Robert Murray McCheyne said it very well. “It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus”—in other words, faithfulness; that’s what he blesses. The Corinthians were enamored of great talents. They needed to love the image of Christ and be imitating it. They needed to be faithful.

So Timothy would be a good example of that, but Paul was coming to them as well. He tells them that in verse 18 as really a kind of warning, where he says that some were arrogant – some of those in Corinth – and living as though Paul would not come; as though he would not come and challenge the things that they were teaching. He began the paragraph with a softer tone. He wanted to assure them that he wasn’t trying to embarrass them. But as he ends this paragraph, he feels the need to again be firm with them.

There were serious problems in the church, and it wasn’t only that there were factions and cliques. Some there were actually opposing Paul, opposing his authority, opposing his teaching, and they were abusing their Christian freedom. They may have been a small group – we’re not sure – but they were certainly an influential group. While he had been there in the city, while he had been ministering to the church Paul had guided in its development, he kept certain people from moral excess.

There were great temptations all around the Corinthians, and he guided them through them. But after he left, they had turned their Christian liberty into license. They were living carelessly. They were pleasing themselves, and had become so self-confident that they thought that Paul would never come back and correct the things that they were teaching, never deal with them. Things were so bad that they were tolerating gross immorality in the church – even in a sense encouraging it.

Now, that’s the subject of the next chapter. Their conduct had fallen far short of their creed. Their confidence was arrogant, and it was wrong. Paul assures them in the next verse, in verse 19, that he would be coming, and he would be coming soon, if the Lord wills. And then he would get a firsthand look at things and put these men, these arrogant men, these men who set themselves up as having some authority, he’d put them to the test. “I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power.”

But only in God’s time, according to his will. Paul was a servant, and he’s seeking to instill that attitude in all of them, and that’s reflected in the things that he says right here in verse 19. He’s under the Lord’s authority and direction, and he would come on God’s

schedule, not his own. So his statement here that he would come if the Lord wills was his recognition of the Lord’s spiritual and providential supervision over his life. It was an expression of humility, and it came from experience.

It came not only from the Spirit of God, but it came from his own personal experience. In Acts 16, Luke writes of Paul’s second missionary journey, and how Paul had tried to carry the gospel first west into Asia, where the city of Ephesus was located. Couldn’t get in there, couldn’t go west, so he goes north and seeks to go east into Bithynia, but the Spirit of God prevented them from going there. The Spirit of God had another plan, God had another plan for Paul.

Paul worked out his schedule, his pattern, his journeys, but the Lord had a different purpose. He wanted him to go into Europe rather than go into Asia, and so that’s where he guided him. Paul crosses over into Macedonia, goes down into Greece, and goes to Corinth. That’s where he established this church. So from his experience of coming to Corinth the first time, he realized that while man proposes, God disposes, and Paul followed that. He lived in communion with the Lord, was sensitive to his will and direction, and he recognized God’s involvement in the circumstances of life to open doors and to close doors.

Now, that’s a servant. That’s a servant’s attitude that can submit to that and recognize God’s in control; I yield to him. So he was eager to visit the Corinthians. He wanted to come soon. He was planning to come soon, but he knew, just as James also teaches, that our plans are always subject to God’s will. But if the Lord wills, he will be there soon, and then he would see what these men who were challenging his authority and his teaching were made of. He’d put them to the test.

They were good talkers; very persuasive, evidently, with words. But Paul wanted to know if there was any real power in their lives, because the Christian life is not only speech, it’s also power. He explains that in verse 20. The kingdom of God is not only words, but power. The kingdom of God is still future. Paul consistently refers to it as something that is yet to come. In chapter 6 he will do that; he writes of inheriting the kingdom of God. We haven’t yet entered the kingdom of God.

And these men in Corinth were boasting about themselves and their living, how they were living, and Paul said earlier in this chapter back in verse 8 that they were living as though they were already reigning. And it may be that they had taught something like that – a kind of realized eschatology, that they’re already in the kingdom, reigning and enjoying

the authority and power of that coming kingdom. So Paul was saying he wanted to see the proof of that. He wanted to see the kingdom power in their lives.

If they were genuine and not mere braggarts, then their lives would demonstrate it. Now, every child of God is equipped with power. Every child of God is equipped to live obediently in this world. We are Christ’s representatives. He has appointed us to be ambassadors on earth, the ambassadors of heaven in this world. This world is not our home; we are pilgrims passing through. But we have been equipped to pass through successfully, and be living witnesses of Christ among the unbelieving.

Every believer has been sealed with the Holy Spirit – Ephesians 1:13. The moment of faith, we’re sealed with the Holy Spirit. He lives within each one of us permanently, keeping us until the day of redemption, giving us the ability to live a life that reflects the life of Christ; that imitates his character. The Holy Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, the virtues that are the opposite of the deeds of the flesh. Paul talks about that in Galatians 5:19-23. He produces love, joy, peace, patience, not immorality, jealousy, or anger. Now, that is real power.

The people in Corinth thought real power was being an influential orator, bending the wills of the audience with your words, that kind of thing. Being a magnetic personality, a charismatic kind of person – that’s what they thought of as power. The real power is what the Spirit of God produces. We all enter the Christian life with baggage, with bad habits, and bad tendencies, and we have that struggle with what is there to the day we die. And yet the fact is that we’re new creatures, we’re a new creation in Christ.

But we have to deal with that principle of sin, that law of sin that’s in us, that Paul describes in Romans 7:14 through the end of the chapter. The Holy Spirit can overcome that. He can overcome our sin. He can tame a selfish spirit. He can make us servants of him, and make us generous toward others. Paul would come and see if these people showed any of that. That’s real power. He expected more from these men in Corinth than just words. He wanted to see power in their lives.

He wanted to see a real change. He wanted to see Christlikeness in them, and that would be the test of the truth of their teaching. That would be the test of their authority, if it was genuine. He knew it wasn’t, and so he’d put that to the test. Now, that’s a word for preachers today, and I don’t mean false preachers. I’m talking about men who get up and teach the Word of God, and do so as faithfully as they can. It’s one thing to stand up before an audience and speak truth. It’s quite another to live it, and live it in private.

I don’t mean just live it in front of your children and your wife; that’s difficult, too. Live it when you’re alone, when nobody but the Lord sees you. But that’s where power is really manifested; that’s where the life is really changed. Paul could say, “Be imitators of me.” Most of us wouldn’t say that. Most of us would be much more cautious. We would say something like, “Do as I say, not as I do.” But Paul lived a consistent life. Now, I do think our conduct will be consistent with our creed, or increasingly consistent with our creed, the more that we know our creed.

The more that we understand who God is and all he has done for us, the more we understand who Christ is and what he's done for us. The more we understand the triune God and what he’s doing for us – his whole plan of salvation. We understand that, that will change us. That’s sanctification, and sanctification doesn’t happen apart from the Word of God. We’re set apart through his Word. Now, he uses other things as well, but essentially he uses his Word, so students, we should be students of his Word. We must be students of doctrine.

But here, it’s more correct conduct than creed that Paul is concerned about. He wanted to bring the Corinthians to a consistent Christian living. There are different ways to do that, with the carrot or the stick. With encouragement or reward, or with a rod of discipline, and the discipline can be very painful. Paul preferred to motivate them to good behavior by encouragement, but if it took something different, if it took something more severe, he was prepared to do that.

And chapter 5 is an example of that. He gave a young man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh so that his spirit would be saved in the day of redemption. That was very unpleasant. That was unpleasant for Paul, that was unpleasant for the church, and obviously unpleasant for the young man. There’s a purpose in it; it’s to correct. So Paul ends the chapter with a question. He gives the Corinthians a choice. “What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?”

The New International Version translates rod as whip – “shall I come to you with a whip?” And that sounds particularly severe. I think the better translation is rod or staff, but either way, he was threatening painful discipline. If he did come with a rod, it didn’t mean he didn’t love them. He was describing his manner or his method of dealing with them and correcting them, not his motive. Love is not as obvious in the rod, and a loving father uses it sparingly.

But sometimes it is the most loving thing, and it is necessary, and Paul was prepared to use it, even though it wasn’t his desire. Now, I have to say all of this takes me back to my childhood. Maybe that’s why I like these Corinthians so much; I can identify with them. I grew up in a family of four boys, and so there was a lot of roughhousing and fighting. I never started any of those fights. You knew that, of course. But when we got caught and when the discipline fell to my mother, it usually wasn’t so bad.

And it often did, because my father was an airline pilot. He was gone frequently, but when it fell to him that was different. I hear it vividly to this day. “Go to your room.” And so we’d march off to our rooms, and we’d sit on our beds, and we’d look across at each other, and look at each other incriminatingly, and blame the other. And then we’d wait, and we’d wait. I think this was all orchestrated. And then we’d hear what we dreaded – the sound of his heavy footsteps coming up the wooden stairs.

And when the door opened, he never had a carrot. It was always a stick, and it was a big one. Now, I know he preferred the carrot; he was that kind of father, a kind of father who would sit by our beds till morning. But we made the choice for him by our conduct. And Paul was telling the Corinthians he preferred the gentle encouragement of his letter and Timothy’s visit to cause them to change, but he leaves the choice to them. The choice is ours as well. Will we choose to live consistently with what we know to be true, so our conduct matches our creed, or will we live to satisfy ourselves?

Are we going to follow the paths that Paul followed, or follow our own path? Well, we can’t do that, of course – at least not without penalty. God will deal with us. He will always deal with his people in love, but he will correct them. He will correct them because he loves them, and the best thing for us is that our conduct conform to our creed, to his creed, to his truth, and so he will deal with us as a father does with his child. And he deals with us most wisely. It’s always for our good, as I say, but how much better to avoid the rod?

How much better to avoid the discipline? How much better to take the gentle way, and imitate Paul, and imitate Christ, and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit? He is real power in our lives. He’s really there. He makes obedience genuinely optional. We can do that. He enables us to be obedient and live a life that’s pleasing to him, and a life that has great rewards. He’s the possession of every believer in Jesus Christ. We are equipped to live faithful lives.

Which is always best because it is the fruitful life, it is the abundant life, as our Lord described it in John 10:10. It’s the good life, so may God help us to do that, to live that life. But of course if you are here without Christ – is anyone here without Christ? Is there anyone here that has not believed in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, as his God and Creator, and the one who died in his place? Then you don’t have the Spirit. You don’t have the opportunity and ability to be obedient, and you’re doomed – doomed to something worse than a rod.

But you can escape that; you who presently lack this glorious life of having God indwell you can have all of that, and you can have it through faith alone in Christ alone. It’s that simple. It’s that simple, because Christ has obtained everything for you at the cross, everything for every believer, all one must do is receive the gift by faith. So may God help you to do that, and help all of us to live a life that honors him and pleases him; one that conforms to our creed with a belief that behaves, but we’ll do that by God’s grace. Let’s pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for this text. It’s a text that I am sure Paul did not enjoy writing. I’m sure this was painful for him. He loved these Corinthians. He wanted to avoid harsh discipline. He wanted to come to them with gentleness, not with a rod. This was a painful paragraph for him to write, and yet what a blessing it is for us, and certainly it was for them, but it teaches us important truths.

That you have called us into a new life, and we are to conform to Christ and not conform to the world. We are to live a life that is consistent with your Word, with a belief that behaves, and so we’re reminded of that, the necessity of that, and the consequences of not doing that. But we also know that we can, by your grace, live a life that’s faithful. So we pray that we’ll do that, that we’ll live to your glory and we’ll please you in all that we do, all –