

1 Corinthians 4:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

What will ye? shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?

Analysis

What will ye? shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness? The question *ti thelete* (τί θέλετε, "what do you want?") places responsibility on the Corinthians—Paul's posture upon arrival depends on their response to this letter. *En rhabdō* (ἐν ῥάβδῳ, "with a rod") evokes paternal discipline (Prov 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15)—firm correction for rebellious children. Alternatively, *en agapē pneumati te prautētos* (ἐν ἀγάπῃ πνεύματι τε πραῦτητος, "in love and a spirit of gentleness")—the father's preferred approach to repentant children.

Prautēs (πραῦτης, "meekness/gentleness") is not weakness but strength under control—the same quality Jesus claimed (Matt 11:29) and Paul commends (Gal 5:23; 6:1; 2 Tim 2:25). Paul's either/or presents stark alternatives: if Corinthians repent (humble themselves, abandon factionalism, submit to apostolic authority), he'll come gently; if they remain arrogant, he'll exercise disciplinary authority. The choice is theirs. This ultimatum concludes his extended rebuke of divisions (chapters 1-4) before addressing specific scandals (chapters 5-6).

Historical Context

In Roman households, fathers wielded absolute authority (*patria potestas*)—including physical discipline of children. Paul adapts this cultural framework, presenting apostolic authority as paternal. The 'rod' was standard disciplinary tool in ancient pedagogy (Prov 13:24). Paul's threat isn't vindictive but corrective—like

a father whose goal is the child's welfare, not punishment for its own sake. His preferred mode is love and gentleness, but he won't hesitate to exercise authority if necessary.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How do you respond to spiritual discipline—with defensive anger or humble repentance?
2. What specific changes does God's 'rod' of correction need to produce in your life to avoid harsher discipline?
3. When you must confront sin in others, do you lead with the 'rod' or with 'love and gentleness,' saving strong measures for those who refuse to repent?

Interlinear Text

τί	θέλετε	ἐν	ράβδῳ	ἔλθω	πρὸς	ὑμᾶς	ἢ	ἐν
What	will ye	in	a rod	shall I come	unto	you	or	in
G5101	G2309	G1722	G4464	G2064	G4314	G5209	G2228	G1722

ἀγάπῃ	πνεύματί	τε	πραότητος
love	in the spirit	and	of meekness
G26	G4151	G5037	G4236

Additional Cross-References

2 Corinthians 13:2 (Parallel theme): I told you before, and foretell you, as if I were present, the second time; and being absent now I write to them which heretofore have sinned, and to all other, that, if I come again, I will not spare:

2 Corinthians 13:10 (Parallel theme): Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the power which the Lord hath given me to edification, and not to destruction.

1 Thessalonians 2:7 (Parallel theme): But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children:

2 Corinthians 1:23 (Parallel theme): Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth.

2 Corinthians 2:3 (Parallel theme): And I wrote this same unto you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow from them of whom I ought to rejoice; having confidence in you all, that my joy is the joy of you all.

2 Corinthians 10:6 (Parallel theme): And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

2 Corinthians 2:1 (Parallel theme): But I determined this with myself, that I would not come again to you in heaviness.

James 3:17 (Parallel theme): But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.