

Fools for Christ

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

How many of you would agree that we live in a time of increasing darkness? This darkness aims to extinguish our light as representatives of Christ's kingdom on earth. To overcome this encroaching darkness we need the wisdom from above that resists the wisdom of the world. The great challenge we face as Christians is that many in our world are not only opposed to the wisdom of God, they are hostile to it.

This was the case in the city of Corinth where Paul planted a church on the foundation of the person and work of Christ. But when Paul was away, the church did not take care to build up the body on the gospel wisdom that he had laid down.

Warren Wiersbe observed: "There is a wisdom of this world that works for the world, but it will not work for the church. The world depends on promotion, prestige, and the influence of money and important people. The church depends on prayer, the power of the Spirit, humility, sacrifice, and service. The church that imitates the world may seem to succeed in time, but it will turn to ashes in eternity. The church in the Book of Acts had none of the "secrets of success" that seem to be important today. They owned no property; they had no influence in government; they had no treasury (Silver and gold have I none," said Peter); their leaders were ordinary men without special education in the accepted schools; they held no attendance contest; they brought in no celebrities; and yet they turned the world upside down!"

Are we trusting in the wisdom of God for our lives or are we leaning on human understanding? In a world that views the wisdom of God as foolishness, we must find our security in Christ to stand firm for His cause.

Main idea: Christians must be prepared to look foolish in this world to be fruitful for the kingdom of Christ.

This morning we are going to learn why faithful followers of Christ look foolish before the world and why it's necessary for gospel advancement.

1. Fools for Christ are willing to look foolish so long as Christ is pleased and believers are built up.

We see from the example of Paul in chapter 11 that fools for Christ are willing to look foolish so long as Christ is pleased and believers are built up. Remember, because of those who opposed his gospel ministry, it became necessary for Paul to put forward his credentials. But even though it was necessary to present his credentials and his motives were pure, he's still felt embarrassed, he still felt like a fool.

Nevertheless he was willing to suffer the embarrassment and look foolish for the sake of Christ and those under his spiritual care. As he continues to explain in verses 16-17:

"I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. 17 What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool." 2 Corinthians 11:16-17

Although Paul was compelled to boast about his credentials, which was natural for his opponents to do, he wants to make clear that he felt like a fool. But because his aim was gospel restoration he was willing to feel like a fool and wouldn't blame others for thinking him a fool. To reinforce this point he states in verse 17, that the boasting he's having to resort to is not what Christ would do, it's what a fool would do.

Jesus taught, *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"* (Luke 14:11). Again, Paul wouldn't have blamed anyone for thinking him a fool for boasting. He felt foolish too. But he felt compelled to for the sake of those being deceived.

Let me add that on other occasions when people would think he was foolish for doing what he knew was wise, he would not allow their negative perception of him to keep him from doing what was right.

On the contrary, he not only expected to be viewed as a fool before the ungodly, he also taught the Corinthians in an earlier letter that they would have to become fools to be truly wise.

Paul writes: *“If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise”* (1 Corinthians 3:18b).

What does Paul mean by *let him become a fool?*” The Corinthians were following the man centered wisdom of the culture to find significance, which was bringing disorder to the church.

To counteract this, Paul explains that if they want to truly be wise they had to be content with looking like fools to the world. In other words, they needed to resist conformity to the world and walk in the wisdom of God even if they looked like fools to the world. The same is true in our culture today that is hostile to the ways of Christ.

But tragically, many professing Christians today often care more about what the culture thinks than what God thinks. While the perverse in our society who have long been out of the closet grow more bolder, many Christians today are growing more silent about their faith.

Christians who make a difference for Christ are good with looking like fools to the world so long as they know they’re behaving wisely before God and bringing honor to Christ.

In this backward society that calls evil good and good evil—that pridefully and publicly parades their deviant lifestyles down the street, you will be called a bigot or intolerant for not affirming or celebrating this rebellion.

During his earthly ministry Jesus said to his disciples, *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but*

because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (John 15:18-19)

Beloved, in this increasingly corrupt culture we need to be prepared to be hated for being holy. And by holy I don't mean self-righteous. To be holy means to live your life set apart for God.

There are some professing Christians that go around talking about how they're being persecuted. But the reality is that they're alienated not for being Christ-like, but for being obnoxious.

On the other hand, if you've never been accused of being intolerant or a bigot it's possible that you've been blending in with the worldly and going along just to get along.

Keep in mind that the reason Paul had to resort to the foolish tactics of those he facetiously referred to as super-apostles was because they maligned him for being Christ-like.

But although he felt foolish for presenting his credentials he did so in order to rescue those who were being led astray. He was boasting not for his sake but for those he had godly jealousy for.

Notice that in verse 18, Paul continues: *Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. 19 For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! 20 For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. 21 To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that.” 2 Corinthians 11:18-21*

When Paul says, *since many boasts according to the flesh, I too will boast*, he's not saying that he's acting in the flesh. Rather, he's saying that he's going to use their same tactics of boasting against them.

However, his motives are nothing like the super-apostles. His motives are that of a father who would say to his daughter's "know it all" boyfriend who objects to his rules: "You may think being my daughter's boyfriend gives you some special privileges, but I'm her

father. She belongs to God and he's given me the privilege and responsibility to care for her. I sacrificed for her, I provided for her and I would take a bullet for her. So not respecting my rules means that you won't be seeing my daughter anymore."

Notice that Paul goes on to say with sarcasm that if the Corinthians could put up with the foolish boasting of the super-apostles they could put up with the confident boasting of his qualifications. If they could put up with those who think themselves so superior that they treat them like slaves—if they could put up with those who treat them so poorly that Paul likens this treatment to being slapped in the face, they could bear with his boasting for their good.

Notice also that concerning how the Corinthians were putting up with the false teachers who were taking advantage of them, Paul writes, "*To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that*" (2 Corinthians 11:21).

Again, Paul is using sarcasm here to expose the false teachers who the Corinthians were tolerating under the false impression that by so doing they were doing good. Paul was not really too weak to tolerate them; he was too wise and He cared too much for the Corinthians to put up with it.

How many of you know that we are living in a society where if you don't affirm people in their beliefs or in their choices no matter how wrong or destructive they may be, you're considered intolerant or a hater. If you don't, for example, use a person's preferred pronoun, if you refer to a biological man as "he" when "he" wants to be called a "she," you're not only being a hater, your speech in some circles, including institutions of higher learning, would be considered violence.

Although as Christians we are to treat everyone with dignity and respect, it would be unloving to affirm someone who is believing the lies of the devil. You don't have to affirm a person in their sin and twisted thinking to love them. We can love people without affirming them in their wrong beliefs and destructive behaviors. To do otherwise would be unloving.

Recently I heard Pastor Jim Cymbala share in a prayer meeting that in a recent pride parade in New York, people could be heard shouting: “We’re here, we’re queer, and we’re coming for your children.”

We can’t remain silent when our children are being targeted by demonic ideologies that will lead them to hell. We cannot and will not put up with it. We are going to teach our children what the bible says is right and wrong, we’re going to teach them that in the beginning God made them male and female, we’re going to teach them that Jesus loves them and that *“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). And if they’re coming for our children, it’s going to be over our dead bodies.

Likewise, Paul, their father in the faith, wasn’t just going to lay down and watch the Corinthians be led astray by boastful false teachers who were being controlled by their deceitful desires. Paul’s attitude was, and our attitude must be, if they’re coming out of their dark closets, I’m coming out of my prayer closet. If they’re boasting, I’m going to boast too.

Paul continues in verse 21: *“But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.”* 2 Corinthians 11:21-22

Notice that to expose and defeat the wolves in sheep clothing, Paul begins by matching the credentials that apparently some of the wolves were bragging about. In other words, he’s saying, you claim to be superior than us because of your Jewish heritage, well I too have Jewish pedigree.

But although Paul begins with his Jewish ancestry, which is what his opponents were putting great stock in, he doesn’t park there. He goes on to emphasize the marks of a true servant of Christ, which his opponents had little of and also viewed as being weak and foolish.

2. Fools for Christ serve others at great cost knowing that to risk all for Christ is the end of all risk.

Notice also that fools for Christ, and this is our second point, serve others at great cost knowing that to risk all for Christ is the end of all risk. Paul continues in verse 23:

*“Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. **24** Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; **26** on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; **27** in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” 2 Corinthians 11:23-27*

When highlighting the true marks of gospel ministers, Paul quickly moves from the physical, which is what the super-apostles emphasized, to his sacrificial service.

Genuine Christian ministry is not driven by an air of superiority or selfish ambition. Rather it's driven by the manifest love of Christ in our hearts—a love that is willing to sacrifice and take risk for the good of others.

“Scar by scar, one commentator observed, Paul shows the Corinthians his battle wounds. Each tells a story of genuine devotion to Christ in contrast to the false teachers' life of comfort and ease. The Judaizers lived in a world in which they would use the word “fantastic!” to describe their ministries. And why not? They showed up in churches already established by Paul's toil, tears, and tribulations. Like thieves harvesting where they hadn't sown, the false teachers performed ministries of ease. On the other hand, Paul's world of ministry was one of growing and learning, filled with pain, heartache, and uncertainty.

Paul's uphill, winding road followed Christ to the cross—a life of suffering and [sacrifice] (Heb. 12:2-3; 1 Pet. 2:21). Charles R. Swindoll

Sadly, like the Corinthians, many Christians today are led astray by the superficial, instead of the supernatural. They become captivated by slick entertainment oriented speakers who can stir the emotions and appeal to their felt needs. And as a result they lose sight of what matters most—Spirit-filled devotion and sacrificial service to Christ.

It's important to note here that Paul testified of the dangers, toils and snares that he experienced in ministry not to demonstrate how strong he was or how much one must endure to be acceptable before God. Rather, as the precious hymn, "Amazing Grace" declares:

"Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home."

As we will see more in a moment, it was the grace of God in Christ, which saves, sustains and secures, that brought Paul through it all and made all the difference in his life.

Notice also that although Paul spoke of the great hardships he endured, he didn't lead the Corinthians to believe that he was above feeling the pressures and anxieties of life. He didn't want them to think that he was like the super apostles who were more concerned with appearing superior than being real.

In addition to the hardships that he endured, Paul testified: "*And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*" 2 Corinthians 11:28-29

Paul wasn't a faithful minister of the gospel because he had tough skin and didn't feel the pressures of life. On the contrary, Paul had a great capacity to love deeply, which comes with a price, namely the capacity

to hurt deeply. And I don't just mean to be hurt by others deeply but to hurt for others deeply.

Kent Hughes observed, "Paul's great heart rose and fell with his people. His greatest pains were heart-pains over his people! This is driven home by his rhetorical questions, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?" (v. 29). Paul's becoming weak when his people were weak testifies to his empathy — he felt with his people. There was not an ounce of indifference in Paul's heart.

Moreover, the fierce counterpart to Paul's empathy was his indignation over the thought of someone falling away from Christ. Literally, the question reads, "Who is entrapped into sin, and I do not burn?" His people's failings set Paul's heart ablaze with pain. This is why Paul got so [jealously] inflamed about Satan's servants in disguise, declaring, 'Their end will correspond to their deeds' (v. 15b)."

O how the body of Christ needs leaders today who don't just love to preach, but who love the people who they're preaching to, who have hearts that breaks for the broken.

Now in addition to testifying of the hardships and heartaches that he suffered as a true servant of Christ, Paul concludes with what he would rather boast of the most, namely his weakness.

3. Fools for Christ boast in their weakness knowing it's their greatest strength.

Notice that fools for Christ, and this is our final point, boast in their weakness knowing it's their greatest strength. Paul continues: *"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands." 2 Corinthians 11:30-33*

Again, as the supreme mark of the authenticity of his gospel ministry, Paul points not to his pedigree, education, or achievements, but rather to his **weakness**. Moreover, he concludes his ministry resume with an unflattering event in his life about having to be lowered like trash in a basket through a window in the city wall to escape persecution.

He could have instead shared about the time in his life when he was bit by a poisonous snake and was unharmed or other spectacular miracles that he experienced. But instead he chooses to boast in his weakness and humiliation.

Beloved, we should give praise and thanksgiving to God for all His wondrous works in our lives. Paul surely did. But as we will learn in chapter 12, Paul understood that his greatest need was to sense his neediness and thus lean on the sufficiency of God's grace day by day. He knew that our greatest asset as believers is our access to God which is opened to us not based on our merit but by the precious blood of Jesus.

“As Christians, Kent Hughes explains, we must acknowledge and embrace our weaknesses, because as we give them to Christ, they become occasions for his strength and glory. Can we embrace our weaknesses? Will we embrace our weaknesses? The answer to that question has everything to do with the authenticity of the gospel and the church and its mission.”

Conclusion

Let the world think us fools so long as we remain faithful to Christ, while we seek His grace to live for His cause, fight for our children and bring glory to His name.