



Fool's Talk, Part 1

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Grace Church | 2.15.20

I'd like to begin this morning with a particular example that will heighten our understanding of the text. Let's go back to Ireland, around 1730. In the early 18th century in Ireland, the country was on the cusp of severe famine and economic depression, mostly due to the rapid increase in population following the seemingly never ending European wars of the 17th century. Many economists, politicians, and social commentators sought to get ahead of the curve and think through solutions to help slow the rising number of working poor and the uptick in economic disparity. Many felt that these politicians were worthless and their schemes only designed to benefit the rich and exploit the poor.

One proposal, however, became very popular. In it, the author laments the state of Ireland, particularly how depressing it is to see a young mother or beggar with several young children and unable to feed or take care of them appropriately. "What is the solution?" he asks. I'd like you to listen to some of his argument:

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection. I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragu.

I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration, that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed... A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter...¹

Well, that is quite the solution to poverty, isn't it? Some of you were not expecting that, although the more literary types saw this coming. This is taken from a pamphlet entitled "A Modest Proposal" by the famous Irish author Jonathan Swift. And if you have not already guessed, it is satire. Swift masterfully employs sarcasm and shock to show just how foolish the economic proposals of his day are, and to wake up the Irish people to the seriousness of their apathy. In

¹ Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal"



Swift's mind, their current direction in dealing with rising poverty is no better an option than raising children to be cooked into a ragu to feed the poor and boost the economy. In fact, his proposal is quite "modest".

And there are times, as we will see in our text this morning, where we find the Biblical authors, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, employ a holy satire to get their point across. We think of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, who are asked to call on their God but aren't getting any response. So Elijah mocks them satirically, saying that perhaps Baal "is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." We think too of Jesus, who when confronted by a rich young man who was unwilling to give up his possessions to follow Jesus, uses sarcasm to point out the folly of chasing possessions, telling his disciples "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." This is not just a clever metaphor. Jesus is showing through satirical humor the utter foolishness of the wealthy. It is more of a modest proposal to expect a camel to fit through a needle than to assume a prideful rich man will enter the kingdom.

And so today in our text, Paul will begin what is called by Biblical scholars his "Fool's Speech", which is a satirical boast in the vein of his opponents, the super-apostles. For the last few weeks we have been working through Paul's interaction with the super-apostles since chapter 10. If you remember two weeks ago, Paul unpacked his understanding of what it means to have true boldness in his ministry. His boldness is rooted in his humility, not in his boasting. So he says in verse 17 of chapter 10: "let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord". Paul is worried that by their false teaching they would lead the Corinthians away from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. And so last week, he exposed the super-apostles for what they really are. We find his summary in 11:13, "such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ." It's pretty clear that Paul does not think highly of these guys at all.

And Paul doesn't stop there. In our text this morning he moves from simply describing the super-apostles to *displaying* and *exemplifying* just how dangerous they really are. This is the point of his satire and his sarcasm, to expose our foolishness for what it is. So here is what we will see from our text today, the main point that I want you to take home: **It's foolish to think our personal accomplishments add up to spiritual strength, when following Jesus really means that glory comes through suffering, weakness, and dependence.** My prayer is that by the time you leave this morning, you can look to your own heart and be able to point out all the foolishness of self-reliance and lean into the beauty of really following Jesus.

It's foolish to think our personal accomplishments add up to spiritual strength (16-23).

Listen how Paul sets up his satirical tactic in **verse 16-18** with a qualifier. Paul is telling the Corinthians that he is about to show them exactly how foolish the superapostles are, but he wants them to know it's satire. He is just play-acting. But if they can't get over that fact, so be it. At least,



he asks, accept my speech on the same terms you accept their speech. Look how he addresses them in **verse 19**. Did you catch the bite of sarcasm there? He is asking them to hear out his little modest proposal, because even if it sounds foolish, they should be used to it! Already they have put up gladly with the foolishness of the super-apostles, so what is a little more from Paul? He even mocks their wisdom as misguided.

Now, I want you to know that Paul takes no pleasure in taking this tone with the Corinthians. He is not using sarcasm just to feel better, or to show off his wit. He feels, rather, as if it is his last resort. His aim is not to mock the Corinthians, but rather to mock the idolatry of outward strength that they are clinging to. He loves them and cares for them too much to keep them in the dark. You can tell that his heart is heavy for their blindness with how he describes their situation in **verse 20**. The Corinthians, in bearing with the fools speech of the super apostles, have become slaves, have been taken advantage of, have become fools themselves.

Paul is familiar with this game. He knows the hearts of men, because he was once there himself. He used to be the one with all the wisdom, the one who everyone looked up to, the pharisee of pharisees with all the spiritual knowledge and knowhow. But listen to how he explains the spiritual state of natural man in Romans 1:

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

The Corinthians who were following the lies of the super-apostles claimed to be wise, but really they had become fools. The shepherds who they thought were leading them to better pastures were really fleecing them behind their backs. He reaches the height of his sarcasm in **verse 21**. You see what he is saying here? “We were too weak to be taken advantage of”. He is showing the Corinthians that it is precisely their hatred of looking weak that has caused them to be taken advantage of. Remember that the Corinthians were self-made people, and so hated anything that made them appear less than in society. But if they had been weak like Paul, the very thing the super-apostles accused him of, well then they would have never had any problems with these guys in the first place. The very thing they hate is the thing which could have saved them from this foolishness. Talk about a dramatic reversal!

And yet, the curious thing about Paul’s situation is that when it comes to outward impressiveness, it’s not as if he was lacking. See the second part of **verse 21**. The super apostles ock Paul for not boasting in his own personal strength and accomplishments, but it’s not as if he doesn’t have any. **Verse 22** shows us how he stacks up. As a Hebrew, no one can challenge his ethnic identity among religious elites. But he is not just a Hebrew because he been grafted into the society and learned the language. He is an Isralite, and so his religious identity is not in question either. He goes back as far as Abraham to make note of his covenant identity, which no one can match. He checks all the boxes that the super apostles do when it comes to their “boasting”.



He would go on to say something similar to the Philippians later in his life. We find it in Philippians 3:4-6,

...though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

So it's not as if Paul had *no reason* to boast in himself and his accomplishments. He wants the Corinthians to know that self boasting is only foolish when it untrue or exaggerated.

And this may seem like a simple concept to us, but I want to press into it for a bit. What are ways that you boast in yourself, and in doing so look like a fool? I want to identify at least two for us:

We Boast by Hiding our Weakness

One of the ways we boast is by failing to tell the whole truth about ourselves. It's easier than ever, in a digital age, to hide our weakness. We get online and exert our opinions, boasting in our selves and only showing part of who we really are. Maybe we don't come out and say "I'm great", or even we do come out and say "I'm not that great", but the heart behind it is a heart of hiding, not repentance. We only expose part of our sins to our community, we put on airs with our spouse, we hide and run from anything that makes us look weaker, and in doing so we run into foolish boasting.

But when people really know you and your weakness, boasting becomes foolish. You should have brothers and sisters in Christ in your life who you cannot put on any airs with. They know when you are brushing yourself up to appear better than you are, and they are unafraid to call you on it. Look for these people. Your self boasting will flourish in isolation and you hide your blind spots and don't let anyone in on them.

We Boast by Comparing our Weakness

Another way that we tend to boast is not just by hiding from the light, but by comparing our weakness and strengths to one another. We may not consider ourselves that impressive, but in comparison with *those* people... But when you pick and choose your strengths and weakness, your blind spots come back to humiliate you.

If you judge everyone according to the low moments or high moments of their lives will quickly become a fool. Especially when you make the same errors you said you never would. If by constant comparison you lean into boasting in self, you will never be able to live up to the standards that you have set for yourself. If not for the grace of God, each of us would be in the same terrible spot: at odds with God and headed for destruction. And in Christ we all arrive at the same glorious spot: reconciled and headed for life.



The good news for us, church, is that Jesus Christ is the great expose of boasting. He had every opportunity to boast in himself, didn't he? But instead, he became weak so that we might become strong in him. And he came to live and breathe and die so that you no longer have to fear being exposed for who you really are. You can come out of the darkness of boasting and the fakeness of putting on a mask of self-boasting. When Jesus came, he came for those in need of a doctor: the sick and the weak and the sinner. He ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners. He isn't put off by your failures any more than he is tricked by your hiding of them. He exposes our boasting as foolish by seeing through it and coming to save us in the midst of it.

The gospel also exposes the foolishness of comparison. It draws us to recognize our own pride. We think we are the only ones who can get the goodness of Jesus, that we are the elite, that we are the "weak, but not that weak ones", and the true gospel just wrecks that. The true gospel says that the cross of Christ, where he went up and bled, was the single most earth flattening event in all of human history. In that moment, it became most clear what has always been: there is no privilege when it comes to inheriting the kingdom of heaven. There is flat and even ground at the cross. Everyone sinners, coming through one way, to one Jesus. There are no advantages, there is no comparison. And this is exactly what Paul is getting at here in 2 Corinthians. Why is he so disgusted at those who boast in themselves? Because they imply that there is something about *them* that makes them better off before God, some impressive aspect of their own nature that gives them more "righteousness". But he knows that God is in the business of stripping us down to reveal just how dead we are, so we can see that if we have repented of sin and put our trust in Christ, all our new life is due to *him* alone. There is no ground for comparison when the only solution to the universal problem of sin is grace from God alone!

In all of this, the Scripture has exposed just how foolish it is to boast in our self-sufficiency. Our accomplishments don't add up to spiritual strength. In claiming to be wise, we become fools. And if we want to maintain Christian witness in an unstable age, we need Christian wisdom. Christian wisdom, in the end, is wisdom that is reliant on the race of God in our weakness. If we want to make it to glory, that weight of glory being prepared that Paul talked about in Chapter 4, then we need something else to boast in than ourselves.

Following Jesus really means that glory comes through suffering, weakness, and dependence (23-33).

Now we get to the point where Paul launches into his satire. He is beginning to peel back the layers of the super-apostles self boasting and deception, and this is the final piece. Notice in **verse 23**. He wants to show the Corinthians that the true gospel he preaches is "better", but he reminds them through a quick aside—"I am talking like a madman"— that he is using their own language, not his. He is speaking as they would. And here is the twist that makes this a satire: in Paul's example, what is it that makes him "better"? Look at the verse again. It's his suffering.



I'm not sure how many of you are college basketball fans, but my wife and I are. Baylor fans, obviously. We love March Madness. And this year we got to watch what is arguably the best Baylor basketball team in school history. Just as they were getting ready to get a number 1 seed in the NCAA tournament with a good shot to win it all, the tournament was cancelled due to coronavirus concerns. My wife and I really sad about it. It was totally a shock. And in a way, when the Corinthians are reading Paul's "boasting", it is as serious shock. But their shock would be less like the NCAA tournament for health concerns and more like replacing it with a curling tournament because curling is "better" than basketball, and then preceding to hype up this curling tournament as if it was the epitome of sports entertainment. It's so silly sounding, it's satirical. It would show just how silly it is that we take our sports so seriously.

Agustus Caesar wrote his own eulogy, a speech that served as the model for self-boasting for the super apostles. It is called the "Res Gestae Divi Augusti". In it he lists his achievements by numbers. This is Paul's tactic too, following their lead. Just listen to Paul's language: "Far greater labors far more imprisonments, countless beatings." No one can surpass my accomplishments! I hold the *record* for beatings. But his "better" is not their "better". He says to the Corinthians, "imagine with me I am one of the super-apostles that you have been bragging about, and I am about to boast in my grand life. Just when you are ready to be inspired by all my fabulous accomplishments, I start telling you all about my various sufferings."

And he goes on with this satirical boast. **Read 24-25.** Five times he was beat up to the point of death by the Jews, just as Christ was. Jews hated him and his message. Three times he was beaten mercilessly with rods and left for dead. The rod was the symbol of Roman rule, and Paul here is boasting in not just how the Jews treated him, but the Romans too beat him. Once he was stoned by a mob in Lystra, where he was left for dead. He barely escaped with his life, in fact they meant to kill him but since his stoning was by mob and not by court rule, they didn't have the organization to carry it all the way through and it was only by the mercy of God through other Christians that he recovered.

The beatings Paul bears show his evidence of his true qualifications over the super-apostles. How foolish they must look, to boast in their privilege and wealth and status, when they look nothing like Jesus. Paul, on the other hand, bears the scars of his true devotion. He shows his love for the church and for the gospel not in his words, but by the marks on his back.

And in the same way, church, your scars and your suffering are purposeful. They are far less foolish than empty words. As Christ carries you through, your scars act as validation in his goodness and faithfulness. You can have two stories to tell. Think of a young, new Christian, asking you what it means to follow Jesus. You can respond with false hope and boast in all your accomplishments and the personal rewards and status you can receive through playing Christian. It may seem attractive to them, but in the end it crumbles into foolishness as you would lead them not to Christ but to self. The second story you can tell is of your suffering, how following Jesus is hard and painful, how life is still full of death and unexpected stress and anxiety. But in that you also tell of your scars, how they are evidence that you identify with Christ, that God sustains you, and that you are not



working in vain. Your scars tell the story of God's faithfulness, not just yours. And that points to Christ. What a better boast it is to boast in your suffering over your self.

Paul also shows not only his suffering, but also his weakness and dependence. Look in **verses 25-27**. Countless times he is in danger from outside sources. He is shipwrecked three times! This was perhaps more common in the ancient world, but not more dangerous than a car crash or something of the like. In every shipwreck he feared for his life. Oftentimes he said, he has gone without food or water or sleep or shelter. All through his ministry: dependent, dependent, dependent. And the crown jewel of it all? See **verse 28-29**. Not only does Paul bear the weight of his own suffering, he bears the weight of others as well. His love for the churches he has helped plant and strengthen keeps him up at night. He is weakn, because his shoulders aren't strong enough to bear the burden of so many. He must recognize his weakness with them.

So he concludes with one more anecdote to show his weakness. This is the conclusion of his resume, his "heroes" story. It's like turning from bragging about your strength generally to bragging bout a specific time and place where your strength was needed and you showed out. Look at what Paul says in **30-31**. I am not exaggerating. I really am this weak. You wan tan example, here is one in **verses 32-33**. Why would Paul bring up this strange example? Think about Paul's life story: the city of Damascus plays a vital piece. Paul comes to Damascus on a mission to imprison and persecute Christians. He is the strongest he has ever been, the most effective Pharisee of the day, the fear of every Christian. And on the way to Damascus, everything changes. He sees Jesus, and he goes from pure strength to utter dependence. Blinded by his encounter with the risen CHRsit, he has to be led by the hand into the city to meet an old man to pray over him humbly to receive sight again. And in Damascus, after Paul begins telling this miraculous story of his humiliation and weakness, he is persecuted himself, only able to escape the city as a criminal. He entered the city with his chest out and head high in his own pride, he leaves the city fearful for his life, hunched up and lowered down in a basket. And this reversal, this one particular point in his story when everything changed, Paul sees as a paradigm for the life of the Christian. We live upside down. We are strongest when we are weakest. We are most fruitful and most faithful when we boast in how God humbles us in utter dependence.

And this is the point for you today, Church. This is our fools speech, that we would boast in our weakness. Not just embrace it not just worship God for it, but even boast in it. That our suffering would not be minimized, but we would see it as the way to the eternal weight of glory prepared for us. If we can do this, throwing aside the foolishness of self-boasting and embracing the way of weakness, we will model Christ. As Paul had to be lowered down in the basket, Jesus too lowered himself in coming to earth. He lowered himself to the point of death and burial. He went all the way to the grave, not half way, but all the way. And he did it so that, just like Paul could escape the hands of the king of Damascus, we can escape the hands of the enemy. If we are lowered down into death with Christ, all the way to the grave, then we too can be raised with him into safety. But it takes that humility, that readiness to admit our weakness, that boasting in Christ's work and not our own. We have to go down to the depths to be raised up with Christ in glory. And I believe we



can, Church, by God's help. If we must boast, let us boast in our weakness. Let us not think too highly of ourselves. Let us be glad to be overlooked and unimpressive.

I heard one older pastor say this week something that is so true. "Now we have the privilege of seeing what only God can do." That's good, isn't it? It's what weakness does. It strips away the burden of taking the credit and it gives you the blessing of seeing what only God can do.

We can boast in many things, but will we be a church who boasts in our weakness and makes Jesus look big? That is my prayer church. Look, many larger churches are not meeting this morning. But really the only reason we are meeting is not because we are stronger and braver, but because we are smaller. We are outwardly weaker! So as you face unique sufferings this week, as the world turns and panics and real fears become realized and schedules and systems are overturned, what will you boast in? Will it be your simple dependence on Jesus, or your own willpower? As we move to communion, let's take this meal of dependence together. Let's boast in what appears strangely weak to others: the broken body and shed blood of Christ.

