

Paul the Fool (first few minutes of recording are missing)

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[0 : 00] of themselves as wise, but all the time in their attitude toward him, the false teachers were! showing themselves as being incredibly foolish. They were acting foolishly because, in verse 19,! they were baiting with fools. Paul's taking a swipe at the false teachers here. They're the ultimate fools. For all their polished appearance, for all their worldly wisdom, for all their accomplished oratory, they're idiots. That's what they are, idiots. The Corinthian Christians are acting foolishly because they are listening to these idiots, their opinions shaped by teachers who don't know what they're saying. The result is that, unbeknown to them, in verse 20, the Corinthians are being enslaved, devoured, taken advantage of, deceived, and abused. These false teachers aren't interested in the spiritual well-being of the Corinthians. They're interested only in their power and their pockets. They're not interested in serving the Christians in Corinth, but being served by them. And the Corinthians, for their part, are foolish in allowing themselves to be exploited in this way. My sister-in-law has a saying. She says, fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

It is all too easy to be fooled by someone. And when you are, you realize that person who fooled you is untrustworthy. But if you allow yourself to be fooled again by that person, you realize it's you who is the fool for not learning the lesson that you can't trust that person. Shame on the Corinthians for putting up with these false teachers who are taking advantage of them so brazenly, who are getting rich at their expense and living comfortably by abusing them. In verse 21, Paul responds, to my shame I must say, we were too weak for that. These false teachers said of Paul that because he did not act like them, he was weak. For the false teachers, strength was expressed in taking advantage of and being served by the Corinthians. But for Paul, true strength was expressed in being taken advantage of and serving the Corinthians. The exact opposite. And from this we get the principle, the gospel minister appears a fool because he uses his position not to be served, but to serve. Not to gain worthy advantage for himself, but to confer spiritual advantage on those God has called him to serve.

The world thinks it's only a fool who serves. It's the wise man who is served. But in the spiritual realm, it's only a fool who is served. It's the wise man who serves.

Remember what the Lord Jesus said, I am among you as one who serves. The greatest among you shall be the servant of all. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. Worldly wisdom sees those at the bottom of the pile as foolish. Spiritual wisdom aspires to be at the bottom of the pile.

The world considers that a man like Paul, who in his pre-Christian state was the rising star of Judaism and could have been anything he wanted to be, is a fool for having given it all up.

[4 : 04] He went from the top rung of the ladder to the very bottom. He went from having slaves to being a slave. He went from giving orders to being ordered about. He went from being rich to making others rich, while he became poor at their expense. In the world's eyes, Paul is the definition of an idiotic fool, but in God's eyes, the wisest man alive.

What was Jesus, if not in the world's eyes, a fool? He willingly divested himself of heavenly glory and became a frail, mortal, weak human being. And having done that, rather than receive the acclaim of the Jews and become their earthly king, he was beaten, tortured, and crucified. On the night before his death, he took off his outer garments, he wrapped a towel around his waist, he filled a basin with water, and he washed his disciples' feet. He took the place of the lowest slave. His servant Paul did the same, misused and abused by the Corinthians, belittled and mocked by the false teachers. His character and integrity constantly called into question. He was, just like his Lord, a fool in the eyes of the world. Many may aspire to the task of full-time ministry in the service

of God. And if they do, they aspire to a noble task, but one which the world counts as being foolish. It is not a prestigious calling. It is one which will lead to the same levels of treatment as Paul received. You're committing to preaching a foolish message in a foolish way. You're committing yourself to doing foolish things in the eyes of the world, being wronged and miscalled, but not responding in type. You are committing yourself to shepherding sheep who bite, to serving not being served. You're foolish to serve in the world's eyes anyways, but in God's eyes, it's the highest wisdom.

Foolish to serve. Secondly, second aspect of the foolishness of a gospel ministry, foolish to suffer. Second half of verse 21 to the end of verse 29. Foolish to suffer.

Paul's capacity to get up after being knocked onto the canvas seems endless. The list of his sufferings is both shocking in its number and severity. This list doesn't begin with his sufferings, but with those things about which he could have boasted had he chosen. The thing is that the things of which he could be proud or the things which caused him pain, Paul doesn't really want to talk about them very much because his ministry is not really about him at all. It's all about Jesus. It's all about the gospel. He was a true blue Israelite, a Hebrew, a descendant of Abraham. If he had wanted to boast about who he was by nature, he could have. Perhaps that's something some of the false teachers in Corinth did. Their credentials for ministry, their ministry CV as it were, was composed of their ethnic background, their religious training. They're of the right people. They're of the right stock. Their qualification for ministry don't have to be spiritual. They're physical. They're social.

[7 : 33] And we have to be so careful about estimating the value of a man's ministry by these criteria. Just because he's got a PhD, just because he's of the right people, doesn't mean that he's a spiritual man or he'll do us any good. Let's be careful of ministers who want to tell us about their achievements, who major on their strengths but hide their weaknesses. Paul had every reason to boast about himself, but he didn't. He had been the rising star of rabbinic Judaism until he became a Christian.

He was appointed by Christ as an apostle, and he has had more of an impact on the Western world than any other person in history. But even today, if we could interview him here and ask him questions, he wouldn't want to talk about himself at all. He'd want to talk about Jesus and his glorious achievements. He was the most effective servant of Christ, but he doesn't want to boast about it.

In fact, he wants to talk about those things which show his weakness. If he's going to boast at all, it's going to be about those things which display Christ's strength through Paul's weakness. We could go through the list of Paul's sufferings in detail, those sufferings which laid him flat on the canvas, but we can't. We don't have time. Read the book of Acts. We get a flavor of just how much this man suffered for the sake of Jesus and the good of Christ's church. In prison, exhausted, beaten, close to death on many occasions, Paul's mind and body had been broken in the service of Christ.

In recent years, skeletons of English archers who fought at the Battle of Agincourt have been discovered and subjected to forensic pathology. It was discovered that their shoulders were massive compared to the rest of their bodies, a clear sign that they had spent their lives building up those muscles necessary for long-range archery. If you had conducted an autopsy of Paul's body, you'd have discovered multiple broken bones and significant evidence of both organ failure and severe trauma. According to church tradition, Paul was beheaded under the reign of the emperor Nero.

But, if we be told, his list of sufferings here in 2 Corinthians 11 leave us stunned as to how he could be strong enough to keep going. Beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, endangered, toiling, sleepless, hungry, thirsty, freezing, cold. Here's a man who knows what it means to suffer for Jesus.

[10 : 18] And he then says one of the most encouraging things as far as a minister goes. He says, apart from other things, verse 28, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. The same apostle who said to the Philippians, do not be anxious about anything, admits to experience anxiety on account of the churches he served.

When he hears of weak and suffering Christians, when he hears of Christians falling away from the faith, he's crushed. He is so invested in the kingdom of Christ that there is nothing he won't suffer with them and for them. And not only his body, but his mind struggles with the pressure.

Far from being the smooth, self-confident, handsome, false teacher of Corinth, Paul has been irreversibly damaged by all he has suffered on account of Christ. When Paul first met with the risen

Christ on the road to Damascus all those years before, God had called a disciple called Ananias to go out and meet Paul in the road.

Concerning Paul, God said to Ananias, I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. The word translated as suffering is that from which we get our English word pathetic, pathetic or pathos.

This intellectual colossus, Saul of Tarsus, this powerful rock of the Jewish establishment, for the sake of Christ became altogether pathetic. In later years, people would look at him, compare him to the false teachers, and say how pathetic that man looks. And they'd be right.

[12:12] But then did Paul look any worse than his master Jesus? Isaiah said to Jesus in his sufferings, his image was disfigured beyond any human likeness. And Jesus said of himself that he was to suffer for our salvation. Back in 2 Corinthians 1-5, Paul has talked of sharing abundantly in Christ's sufferings. Listen, is this not the highest privilege?

Painful though it is, that we should share in Christ's sufferings. Again, in Philippians 3, 10-11, Paul declares that his great aim in life is to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, and to share in his sufferings.

At this stage, let me recommend to you an author, a Christian author, whose books on serving Christ through suffering offer a remarkable insight into the teaching of Scripture.

Ajit Fernando, Ajit Fernando is a Sri Lankan pastor, and a long-term worker for Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka.

He gets right to the heart of the meaning and value of suffering as we serve Christ. Anything Ajit Fernando writes is worth buying, and worth reading two or three times.

[13:38] One of the books on pastoral ministry that I recently read was recommended to me by Kirk, and it's called The Art of Pastoring. In this book, the writer, who's a minister himself, describes an interview he had back at the beginning of his ministry, where his qualifications for ministry were being assessed. After answering all the requisite questions on church history, theology, in the biblical languages, the professor of systematic theology at his seminary, who was a towering intellect, looked into his eyes and said, have you suffered? Have you suffered?

Because for this man, this towering intellect, suffering for Christ was the ultimate qualification for becoming a minister of the gospel. Now, ministers don't like to, nor really should they, speak about their weaknesses, but it's the weakness and sufferings of the minister which qualify him for the role God has set for him.

It puts us to shame somewhat, does it not? We suffer a tiny bit for being Christians. Perhaps someone belittles us a little bit. Someone mocks us a little bit.

And it's enough for us to give up our Christian profession altogether. We give up because the suffering is just too much. If anyone was entitled to give up, it was Paul. But see how many times he got up from the canvas.

Think of the sufferings of Job, of Joseph, of David. But they endured, they persevered. Physical, mental, societal, and spiritual suffering is not to be unexpected in the ministry.

[15:27] It's not surprising. Important stage in becoming an effective gospel minister. His Jewish contemporaries, perhaps those he grew up with, would have looked at Paul later in life and said, He's a fool.

He had everything in life before he started following and serving Jesus. In the world's eyes, it's the height of foolishness to choose his life of suffering and pain for the sake of Jesus.

In the world's eyes, of course it's foolish. But in the eyes of God, it's the most precious thing. It's a beautiful thing. It is true wisdom, as we see in our conclusion. If you aspire in any way to the ministry, you must expect suffering.

It's given. It's inevitable. But along with the suffering, you'll also get the comfort. And he who experiences the closer comfort of Christ is no fool.

The third aspect of the foolishness of a gospel ministry. Foolish to serve, foolish to suffer, and then lastly from verse 30 to 33. Foolish to speak. Now, we'll never know how Paul sounded as a preacher.

[16:40] Perhaps he was rather timid. But without a doubt, through his plain exposition of the gospel of Christ and the Word of God, he would have left you under no illusion that the Holy Spirit was at work through him.

We have examples of his sermons in the book of Acts. For example, his sermon to the people of Athens. Interestingly enough, in these sermons, he doesn't refer to himself. He's too busy speaking about Jesus. Even when defending himself before Festus and other Roman officials, he tells the story of his life factually, without any sense of self or embellishment. By contrast, the false teachers in Corinth were always speaking about themselves. They gave the impression of competence, studiousness, and strength. Paul was timid, and he was fearful. If he was ever called upon to speak about himself, we read of what he spoke about in verse 30. If I must boast, I'll boast about the things which show my weakness.

[17:49] When the false teachers stood up, they spoke about the things which showed their strength. When Paul stood up, he boasted about the things that made him weak. He proceeds to tell the story of how, at the beginning of his Christian life, he was almost trapped in Damascus, until he was let down in a basket from a window.

Hardly a good way to begin his ministry, right? Running scared from Damascus. Ever since then, when he speaks about himself, Paul refers to those things which make him weak. He never boasts about his achievements. It's hardly the way to win friends and influence people. Usually, our speakers talk about the things they have done. Listen to the Prime Minister's questions from the Houses of Parliament.

And he'll reel off a list of his achievements week on week. You don't go to a job interview to speak about your weaknesses. But from a spiritual perspective, as we've already seen, it is precisely those weaknesses which qualify you to serve God.

After all, did we not come to Christ from a position of weakness in the first place? We didn't come in a position of strength. We came admitting our guilt and our sin.

[19:10] And we trusted in his strength and his righteousness. We came humbly to him. And nothing's changed in our Christian lives. The further we go on, the more mature we get, the less we want to talk about ourselves, and the more we want to talk about Jesus.

In fact, isn't that one way we measure someone's maturity in the faith? When their speech isn't full of themselves and their own achievements, but of Jesus and His.

But the world cries out, you're a fool! Highlight your strengths! Hide your weaknesses! But the truth is, and we'll get back to this in two weeks' time in chapter 12, the preacher can either speak of the achievements of Christ, or he can speak about his own achievements.

He cannot speak about both. Think about that this week. The preacher can either talk about his achievements, or Christ's achievements, but he cannot speak about both.

The preacher can either glorify himself, or he can glorify Jesus, but not both. Preaching the wisdom of God and the cross of Christ may seem foolish to the world, but in the eyes of God, it's the height of wisdom and forever blessed.

[20:30] Most of you will have heard the name Jim Elliott. Some of you maybe haven't. Jim Elliott was an American missionary to the Haurani Indians of present-day Ecuador.

Elliott was top of his secondary school class and could have gone on to become an actor or a politician. But he turned his back on it all and chose to go to Ecuador and become a missionary to the unreached Haurani Indian tribe.

People thought he was crazy to give up everything and to spread the good news of Jesus. On January 8, 1956, Elliott and his missionary partners were cruelly murdered by a band of Haurani warriors.

In the world's eyes, it was a total waste. Before he died, Elliott wrote these words in his diary, words which my minister, when I first became a Christian, seared into my mind and have affected the way I think about everything.

Elliott wrote these words, Let me say that again so that you can seed it into your minds as well.

[21:58] He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. Jim Elliott gave his life and he gained eternal life.

No fool, that man. The only question remaining for us all this evening is this. In light of all we've studied from 2 Corinthians 11, that you cannot be wise in both the eyes of the world and the eyes of God, are you, like Paul, willing to be a fool for Christ?

You'll be very wise if you give up what you cannot keep in order to gain what you cannot lose.

Again, are you willing to be a fool for Christ?

Are you willing to be a fool by serving God's people, by suffering for Christ, and by speaking for God? Let us pray.

Lord, we thank you for the inspired words of Scripture. We dare not exalt a man, be it Paul, be it any minister. We exalt only Christ.

[23 : 09] Lord, we thank you for the humility of Christ. And we thank you that he was a real man.

Lord, as we come to you tonight, we pray that you would help us to drop the pretensions to strength and to recognize that each one of us behind these facades and masks we wear are all desperately weak and in need of your grace and strength.

We pray that you would help us to serve you foolishly. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.