

Ultimate Folly (our last evening service in the St Vincent Street building)

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[0 : 00] According to the dictionary, the English word foolish means unwise, stupid, or not showing good judgment.

We've all done foolish things, and at times we've all played the fool, but with time and under the Holy Spirit's sanctifying influence, perhaps we're all getting a little less foolish and a bit more wise.

You know, they say, there's no fool like an old fool, but perhaps as it comes to our passage today, we might also say, there's no fool like a royal fool.

In Isaiah 39, King Hezekiah, one of the greatest of all the Old Testament kings, does a most foolish thing, something that will cost his descendants very dear.

It's summed up in his thinking process in verse 8. There will be peace and security in my days. There will be peace and security in my days.

[1 : 06] Any thought process, be it from young or old, king or commoner, which thinks in terms of peace and security in my days, however well reasoned, is unwise, stupid, and not showing good judgment.

It's entirely as foolish as Neville Chamberlain's announcement, peace in our time in 1939. It is foolish to do things today, or not to do things today, that will end up costing our descendants very dear.

In other words, our focus must not be mainly on peace and security in my days, but peace and security in theirs.

And that's one of the reasons why, in God's clear providence and guidance, we have taken the decision that this will be our last service in the St. Vincent Street Church.

We are not thinking about our likes and our dislikes, our comforts or our preferences. We're thinking about our descendants. We're thinking about the legacy we leave them.

[2 : 21] This, it seems to us, isn't the path of folly and recklessness, but of wisdom and prudence. Hezekiah chose the path of folly, and it cost his descendants dear.

But we, by the grace of God, will not do the same. First of all, let's look at folly exposed.

Folly exposed. My father used to say to me, and it's a lesson I'm still trying to learn, it's one thing to be a fool, it's another to open your mouth and prove that you're a fool.

But when it comes to the foolishness of King Hezekiah, you want to say to him, it's one thing to be a fool, Hezekiah, but it's another to open your treasure house to envoys from Babylon.

Hezekiah, it's one thing to be a fool, it's another thing to make your children pay for it. Let me orient you and put this text in context.

[3 : 25] Hezekiah is living in the late 8th century BC. At that time, the kingdom of Judah was invaded by the Assyrian Empire under King Sennacherib. The Assyrians are intent upon domination, tyranny, and ethnic cleansing.

As they march their way through Judah, they destroy everything in their path. Over the course of a few weeks earlier this year, we studied together Hezekiah's prayer in 2 Kings chapter 19, where he prays for God to vindicate his name and for victory over the Assyrians.

And God heard Hezekiah's prayer. The angel of the Lord swept through the camp of the Assyrian army, destroying infantry and cavalry. Assyria was defeated, and Sennacherib ran home with his tail between his legs.

Very soon afterwards, Hezekiah became sick, and Isaiah the prophet told him that he was going to die. Again, Hezekiah prayed, and the Lord added 15 years to his life.

And so by the time we reach Isaiah 39, we have a healthy Hezekiah, firmly established as king, deeply loved by his people, and secure in Judah's military position.

[4 : 47] He's getting old, and unfortunately, as happens with many older believers in the Bible, he stops growing in his faith.

He folds his arms, and he looks around him at all his hands have done for him. And rather than depend upon the Lord's protection, he begins to depend more on his own achievements.

So in Isaiah 39, we're in the late 8th century BC. And it's at this point, the king of Babylon sends envoys and gifts to Hezekiah.

And we read that when Hezekiah received them, he welcomed them gladly, and he showed them his treasure house. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm he did not show them.

So you can almost imagine a proud, cocky Hezekiah pointing to all his gold, all his military equipment, his fertile fields, his burgeoning treasure houses, and saying to these envoys from Babylon, See all this?

[5 : 56] It's all mine. I have enough to supply my needs for a hundred lifetimes of men. When my brother was a teenager, he kept hens, and he sold the eggs to local restaurants.

And he kept the money he earned from the sale of the eggs in an old spodden, hidden at the back of a cupboard. Well, a new boy came into my brother's class in school, and the two of them became friends.

It wasn't long before my naive brother showed his new friend his old spodden, and where to find it at the back of a cupboard. My brother thought nothing of it.

Life was a lot simpler in these days, you understand. Well, the next day, while my brother was at school, my father was sleeping, having been on night shift, he heard steps in the hall.

He thought it was one of us, and so he sleepily came out of his bedroom wearing only his underwear. But what he saw running down the hall wasn't one of us at all.

[7 : 03] It was my brother's friend. He'd sneaked into the house, he'd gone to the back of that cupboard, and he'd stolen that old spodden with my brother's chicken money in it.

Because my father really wasn't waiting much, I don't actually think he was waiting anything, he couldn't run fast enough to catch the thief. But that day, our family learned an important lesson.

Don't flaunt your valuables, they'll end up stolen. Insurance companies work the same way today. Don't flash your bling, you might say.

Put your garage, put your car in a locked garage. Don't leave your wallet in front of the window, and so on. But what did Hezekiah do? He showed the Babylonian envoys all the money in his spodden, and he showed them the cupboard in which to find it.

He showed them everything. Now, these men weren't his friends, but he showed them all his gold anyway. Why did he do it? Well, probably because in his older years, he was becoming foolish and proud.

[8 : 12] What did he think would happen? It's clear he wasn't thinking at all, and if he was, his thinking processes were skewed toward the stupid end of the spectrum. There will be peace and security in my days, he thought to himself.

Remember, this is all taking place in the late 8th century BC. Babylon at the time is a rather minor player in the politics of the ancient Middle East. Well, by the mid-7th century BC, 100 years later, the situation had somewhat changed.

Babylon had become a major power, and it had filled the gap left by the Assyrian Empire. In fact, the Babylonian Empire grew to be far larger and more ferocious than that of the Assyrians.

And when the Babylonians thought to themselves, where can we invade next? Where can we steal and pillage as much gold as we can next? They knew everything that was in Hezekiah's treasure house.

The choice was natural. They invaded Jerusalem. That's what they did in the late 7th century BC. After these envoys, 100 years before, had seen Hezekiah's treasures, they invaded Judah.

[9 : 31] This time, rather than being defeated, the Babylonians broke Jerusalem's siege, they carried off many of its inhabitants into exile, and they plundered all its treasures.

100 years after Hezekiah showed such foolishness, what Isaiah said in verses 6 and 7 came true. Behold, the days are coming when all that's in your house and that which your fathers have stored up till this day shall be carried to Babylon.

Nothing shall be left, says the Lord, and some of your own sons who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

It was Hezekiah's folly that caused the exile, the captivity of the Jewish people in Babylon, the horrific ethnic cleansing, the murder, the torture, the displacement, so prophesied vividly in the book of Jeremiah, described in books like Esther.

My brother showed his new friend where to find the old spodden with all his money. And Hezekiah showed these envoys from Babylon where to find the treasure in Jerusalem.

[10 : 55] What exactly did he think was going to happen? Well, it would seem from his response in verse 8, there will be peace and security in my lifetime, that he didn't really care that his descendants would suffer so horrendously just as long as he had it good in his own day.

So we go back to the beginning. Foolishness is being unwise, stupid, or not showing good judgment. You want to see a portrait of a fool?

See King Hezekiah. There's a good one. Hezekiah, sacrificing his descendants on the altar of his pride and preferences. How very foolish.

And yet, is it not true that we often see the same foolishness in the church today? As long as things are according to our own comforts and preferences during our lifetimes, we don't really think too much of what will happen to our descendants.

As long as things are to our liking, what do we really care what happens after we're dead and gone? As long as there's peace and security in my day, then who cares for our children and our children's children?

[12 : 18] This is a folly entirely as foolish as that demonstrated by Hezekiah in Isaiah 39 and condemned by God. It is that form of foolishness that sacrifices not only the heritage of the past but the history of the future upon the altar of my own personal preferences today.

I know the elder of a church today which exists only on paper, a complete anomaly. It could only happen in the Free Church of Scotland. I was the interim moderator for his congregation for a short time.

The membership at that time numbered less than five people. When I took on the interim moderatorship of his congregation, he angrily waved his finger in my face and he told me, if you even try to change one thing about us, to change one thing that we've always been doing here, I'll take it to presbytery.

A good man, a dear old man, but a dear old man whose wife had left the church decades earlier and whose children and grandchildren wanted nothing to do with the church.

If you even try to change one thing about the way we do things here, I'll take it to presbytery. Well, I changed nothing about the way they did things and now there are no members, no services, and no free church witness in the town he represented.

[13 : 49] He got what he wanted, his own preferences. Nothing changed. Foolish, foolish, old man. He sacrificed the heritage of his forefathers and the history of his descendants upon the altar of his preferences.

His children will pay dear for the decision, for his decision. They may even pay eternally for his decision. Foolish, old man, good man, but foolish, just like Hezekiah.

There's no fool like an old fool and there's no fool like a royal fool. Why did God the Son become incarnate of the Virgin Mary? Was it for His own preference, His own comfort, or was it for ours?

Why did Jesus endure such mockery and rejection at the hands of sinful men? Was it His own preference or was He thinking of us? Why did Jesus die on the cross and bear the full weight of our sin?

Was it His own preference or were you on His mind as He suffered and died on that tree? How grateful we are that the Lord and His gospel are not according to the wisdom of men, but according to the wisdom of God.

[15 : 06] This is fully exposed Hezekiah's preferences and pride, condemning his descendants to 70 years of cruel captivity in Babylon.

Secondly, let's move on to look at fully applied. Fully exposed, fully applied.

For many years now, Hezekiah's thought process in this verse has haunted me, terrified me, and challenged me in equal measure.

How can I avoid as your minister and how can we avoid as Glasgow City Free Church slipping into Hezekiah's mindset of saying, as long as there's peace and security in my day, then who cares what comes after?

So to me, it's been a very searching question, one of which, one I've struggled with for many, many years. I'm only scratching the surface, really, of how to apply this truth to our situation.

[16 : 09] But as I say, moving away from this building is part consequence of this. For 50 years, this building has been the cause of more arguments among its leaders than I care to tell you.

It's time we thought of our descendants, not of our own personal preferences. But merely scratching the surface of this topic, let me suggest three ways in which we can be in danger of falling into Hezekiah's foolishness, that of sacrificing the heritage of the past and the history of the future, the heritage of our forefathers and the history of our children upon the altar of our preferences.

First, the folly of slavery to culture. Second, the folly of slavery to lifestyle. And third, the folly of slavery to personality.

I'm sure there are many other applications of this principle you might want to go away and think about, even as I'll continue to work on in my own heart. First of all then, the folly of slavery to culture.

The folly of slavery to culture. Our culture is the single strongest influence upon our lives. Young or old, try as hard as we might, we cannot separate ourselves out from the culture in which we live.

[17 : 35] We buy culture's big storylines and measure ourselves by culture's standards of success. But perhaps, like my old friend from a congregation that no longer exists except on paper, you might insist to me, but I'm being counter-cultural by refusing to change anything.

I'm being counter-cultural by staying the same. Wrong answer. All you've done is to conform to the culture of 50 years ago or 100 years ago when entirely as culturally influenced, if we're thinking that way, as any of the emo generation are today.

You know how fond I am of the great Glasgow minister and evangelist Andrew Boner, who ministered in this part of Glasgow and West for over 40 years. But that was back when Queen Victoria was empress of the world, the mid to late 19th century.

He reached out to the west end of Glasgow according to the culture of the Victorian age, not according to the culture of the Jacobean age, the late 17th century.

And if he was here today, he would not thank us for clinging on to a Victorian culture in the church while the world around us is living in today's culture. He'd call us fools, just as Hezekiah was a fool.

[19 : 07] So we must not live in the past. To do so is to be a slave to yesterday's culture. But likewise, we must be careful not to become slaves to today's culture.

Cultural shift is happening so quickly that the prevailing culture changes every few years, not every few decades, perhaps every few months. Who would have thought 10 years ago that the liberalization of our laws would render feminists like J.K.

Rowling nervous about going into a ladies' changing room for fear of meeting a naked, hairy man there claiming to be a woman? Who would have thought it?

Cultural shift is taking place so rapidly in our society. As Donald Morrison helpfully reminds us often, the pace of change will never be this slow again.

The pace of change will never be this slow again. Well, what is to be our response as a church? A hundred years ago, the response of the church was to dispense with the authority of the Bible.

[20 : 15] Seventy years ago, the response of the church was to form huge city-central congregations where thousands of Christians would gather together to hear the world's best preachers. Forty years ago, it was to become charismatic, happy-clappy.

Thirty years ago, it was to become a seeker-sensitive church. Twenty years ago, it was to become a church without walls. Ten years ago, it was to become a missional church.

Yes, and I'm sure it'll change again as soon as night follows day. If we become slaves to culture, then our standards cease to be those of the Word of God and become those of the prevailing culture around us.

Surely a recipe for chaos. Well, the point's this. While being sensitive to the culture of the day, the church must steer its own path.

Neither being slave to this culture, nor the culture of a hundred years ago, and even worse, to presume what tomorrow's culture's going to look like. And for those of you who wish it was different, listen, this is a really tough steer, but it's how we're going to avoid slipping into obscurity and handing over only an empty shell to our children.

[21 : 40] Bible in hand, praying on our knees, we must realistically think of our descendants and not our own cultural preferences. promises. Anything less, and we risk falling into the foolishness of Hezekiah, and it's not us who will pay the price, but our children.

Second, the folly of captivity to lifestyle. Folly of captivity to lifestyle. Now, many, if not all of us, I sincerely hope, are driven to see God glorified in our dear green city, and Jesus proclaimed through our words and our works.

I'm sure we all want that. But as with the previous point, the lifestyle of the Christian is prone to two extremes, both of which we must avoid if we are to be faithful to the heritage of our forefathers and to the history of our descendants.

The first is this, under engagement with the world. Under engagement with the world. that form of pietism which views everything outside the doors of this church as evil.

Zealously avoid it. The world is out there. And if we want to be truly holy and to glorify God, we need to huddle into each other.

[23 : 04] We need to vaccinate Glasgow City Free Church from the world by wearing our own masks of disengagement. So don't engage in politics. don't engage in science.

Don't engage with the arts. And don't engage with normal people. Be completely separate.

Even to the extent of having a closed fellowship where only our kind of people are welcome. Be a pietist. Be a Protestant Amish.

Withdraw from the world, it's evil. Of course, what this view fails to take into account is the doctrine of sin. Listen, the world outside this church building isn't half as sinful as the world inside my heart.

The world outside this building isn't half as sinful as the world inside my heart. Out there, beyond the doors of this church, the world is no more sinful and no less sinful than what it is in here.

[24 : 15] By withdrawing from society we're signing our own death warrant. We'll have nothing to hand over to our kids. But the second folly is this, over engagement with the world.

Over engagement with the world. This is an exaggerated view of Jesus' principle, you are the salt of the earth. For salt to have its flavoring and preservative effect, it needs to be rubbed into the meat.

And so the person who's over-engaged with the world, wholly identifies with the world, can't be distinguished. He loses those distinctions which must exist between the world and the church, because by his own measure, he wants to win people.

So he justifies his drunkenness and his promiscuity on the basis that he's trying to connect. He wants nothing to do with commitment to the church because he believes in a church without walls.

Well, of course, the problem with this second folly is that God has called us to be separate. And whereas God loves his world, it's his church which is his bride. It corresponds to what technically we might call an over-realized eschatology, realizing that our home is not here but in heaven.

[25 : 36] Again, if we over-engage with the world and lose our distinctives, we are signing the death warrant for our children because they will never see the difference the gospel can make in our lives.

So rather than pursuing, rather than falling into either excess, we have to pursue a path of healthy engagement with the world around us, knowing that just as Jesus' principle teaches us, the salt must not become the meat, but likewise it must be rubbed into the meat if it's to take effect.

Only as we steer that difficult course between under-engagement and over-engagement can we hope to hand over to our children a healthy church and prevent ourselves from falling into Hezekiah's folly.

Well then lastly and briefly, the folly of slavery to personality. The folly of slavery to personality.

There are so many more applications I could make of this as the 39 verse 8 principle, perhaps over supper, you might want to talk about some of them. But the one with which I close concerns the cult of the personality or the celebrity.

[26 : 59] Over the years, Christians have become rather immune to the warning of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1, namely divisions between Christians based upon personality.

personality. Some follow Mark Driscoll. Others follow John Piper. Others follow Steve Chalk. Still others, whoever is the flavor of the day.

These men, whether they admit it or not, and I challenge them to deny it, rather like the limelight, but it will always prove a snare to them.

Ten years ago, it was Mark Driscoll. Ten years ago, it was Steve Timmis. Ten years ago, it was Jonathan Fletcher. Ten years ago, it was our own D.

D. Campbell. But it was all so much folly because each of these men fell in their own ways. Ah, but you see, Spurgeon never fell.

[28 : 07] And Martin Lloyd-Jones never fell. But you see, if you hold them up based upon their prominence in the church, you are entirely as guilty as today's personality possessives.

At best, they were faithful servants of Jesus Christ. What are we teaching our children if we have a bigger fascination with personalities and gifts than with Jesus?

Jesus? The more we idolize fallen men, the more they become idols to us, and the less we worship Jesus. You worship Jesus, I'm not the man.

Anything less, and we fall into Hezekiah's folly. God bless you. Amen. Well, in two years' time, a little over two years' time, our church is going to be 200 years old.

Wow. Not our building, but the real church. We want to thank God for His faithfulness and His long-suffering with us, but we need to commit ourselves to the next 200 years, to refusing to fall into Hezekiah's folly, lest our descendants pay the steepest price.

[29 : 28] Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, who did everything He did, not for Himself, but for us.

This is the heart of the gospel we love and we preach. that Jesus loves us, and He loves our children, and He loves our grandchildren.

Let us pray.