

What Kind of Fool Am I?

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] I am the greatest the world's ever seen. Do you remember those words of the great, maybe not the greatest, but who knows, Muhammad Ali.

We live in a boastful world, don't we? I think Muhammad Ali was a little bit extreme, but in our world in general, it's a boastful world.

The boasts of winning sporting athletes and coaches and players as well, maybe not even least. The boasts of their supporters as well.

Think of the boasts of the sporting ministers of Australia and Britain before the Olympics. Think of the boasts of politicians, always wanting to parade great achievements and to boast in yet-to-be-achieved great achievements as well.

The boast of business. Think of our pride and boasts in our normal one-to-one conversations with people, acquaintances, work colleagues and others.

[1 : 05] Always wanting to try and outdo somebody else to show that our story is better, our experience is greater, our achievement is more significant. Even in church circles, the same sort of thing happens.

This element of pride and competition, of boastfulness. Well, it's not new. I think it's part of the fallen human nature that we want to be proud and boastful or arrogant about our achievements in some way or other.

And so it was for the Corinthian church nearly 2,000 years ago, the same sort of thing. They were boasting that they had made it spiritually, that they were mature, that they'd received God's blessings and gifts and great spiritual experiences that they were manifest in their community. They were it. They had made it. They were significantly and spiritually mature people. And that boastfulness spilled over into the way they related to their leaders, to Paul and Apollos, as we saw last week.

Their boastful preferences leading to quarrelling and jealousy and division amongst them as a church. But as this whole letter, 1 Corinthians, shows, from beginning all the way through to the end, boastfulness is misplaced.

[2 : 20] Fundamentally, it's misplaced for Christian believers. Their boastfulness in their leaders, as we saw last week, leads to division and a fracturing in fellowship within the church.

Their boastfulness in the gifts that God had given them, the spiritual gifts, their speaking in tongues or the spiritual experiences or whatever it was, has led them to ignore the fact that it's God who's given them freely and graciously to them, as though somehow it was their achievement.

Their boastfulness in their experience, as we saw two weeks ago, has confused the role in their minds of God's spirit to give clarity of understanding to the gospel.

For them, it was simply looking for some experience. In fact, their boastfulness and our boastfulness undermines the gospel completely.

Human wisdom boasts in our power, in our achievement, in our ability. Human wisdom is boastful. But God's wisdom, which looks so foolish to our world, God's wisdom in the cross is to save us not by our merit, our achievement, our ability or even potential, but to save us undeserving, unmerited, unworthy and helpless.

[3 : 45] What looks foolish to the world is wisdom in God's eyes. The Corinthians, remember, lifted up their leaders into a celebrity status as part of their boastfulness about being allied with Paul or Apollos or some other.

Paul dealt with that issue of boastfulness in chapter 3, as we saw last week. But he completes the argument at the beginning of chapter 4 as well. Back in chapter 3, verse 21, he said, So let no one boast about human leaders.

Now he gives a corrective to that. How are we to think then of the pastors, preachers and teachers? It's the human leaders in a church context that Paul in particular is addressing.

So how are we to think of them? Paul begins chapter 4 saying, well, think of us in this way. As servants of Christ and as stewards of God's mysteries.

That's it. Servants and stewards. Not really a celebrity status lifted up high on a pedestal to be glorified.

[4 : 53] Not at all. That causes division. A false fracturing in fellowship. Rather, Paul says to Paul, Apollos, any faithful Christian minister.

Merely a servant. Merely a steward. And the task of being a servant or steward is to serve God fundamentally.

Servants of Christ, as he says in the beginning of verse 1. And to be a steward is to be looking after something entrusted. The word that's used is the word of somebody who's given the task of, say, managing somebody's estate for the landowner.

Paul is saying, in effect, entrusted to him as a steward is God's property, we might say. The mysteries of God, as it's described in verse 1.

That is the gospel, as Paul's made clear in chapter 2. That's the mystery that's now being revealed that was hidden, is now no longer secret or hidden. So the task of a servant or a steward is not to please the people.

[6 : 02] It's not to be exalted. But rather it's to be faithful. To be found trustworthy. To ensure that the gospel entrusted to them, they guard and protect and keep.

And that's what Paul is saying, that he's doing and has done, in fact. Now notice some implications here then, about how a minister is to be viewed or assessed.

Not by worldly standards of success. Big congregations of wealth, which indeed infiltrates much of the church today. Nor even, Paul goes on to say, should a minister really be judged by people at all. That is because we people don't know the inner things of a person's heart or motivation. We see the outside, but not the inside. And yet so often we are quick to judge another person on motives that we do not know.

Oh, that person's motive is greed or anger or something. We don't know that. The behaviour may suggest that, but it may not. And very often we're quick to judge things that we cannot accurately assess.

[7 : 19] Paul says he's not even going to judge himself. But though his conscience is clear, a conscience is not a fallible guide. So often we think theologically based on a Disney cartoon.

Jiminy Cricket Theology. Let your conscience be your guide. But our consciences are not always accurate and are certainly not infallible. And Paul knows that as well.

So what he says in the next verses is this. With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. That is, I don't really worry about what you say because your judgment, your opinion or approval is not my main desire.

I'm not aware of anything against myself. That is, my conscience is clear. But I'm not thereby acquitted. That is, just because my conscience is clear may not mean that I'm actually clear in God's eyes.

It's the Lord who judges me, he says at the end of verse 4. That's what matters. Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time. That is, before the Lord comes. Who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

[8 : 31] But we humans are quick to judge others' hearts even though we don't see them. Then each one, on the day of the Lord's return, will receive commendation from God.

That's what's motivating Paul and that's what he's saying about being judged. Not to be judged by other people. Not to be judged by other people. Not even by himself.

But ultimately, and only on the final day, by God himself. Well, there are important things to apply here.

I guess for those of us who are ministers, the driving motivation that Paul is reflecting here is to find commendation from God for being faithful.

Not for being successful in worldly eyes. Not being motivated by human approval. Though so often that's tempting. But rather to be motivated by being faithful in God's eyes on the day of Jesus' return.

[9 : 35] There's a caution, I think, to church members here. That we must be very slow to judge church leaders. Careful not to judge things that we cannot accurately assess.

And certainly careful not to exalt church leaders onto some celebrity status pedestal. But for all of us, I think. Not just those who are ministers.

We are all, in fact, stewards of God's gospel. And our primary task is to be faithful to that. Well, Paul has been writing about this for the sake of the Corinthians.

He says in verse 6, I've applied all this to Apollos and to myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of this saying. Nothing beyond what is written.

So that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. Now, the saying that he refers there is not a biblical saying. It may have been a slogan in church life of his day.

[10 : 35] What it seems that Paul is meaning here is that we are not to judge beyond what the scriptures say. That is, the scriptures are actually giving us our guidelines.

We're not to add other guidelines or distort them. Nothing beyond what is written in scripture. is what I think Paul is saying about how we should view church leaders, God's gifts to us, church life in general.

Otherwise, what happens, he says, is boastfulness takes over. As he says, you'll become puffed up at the end of verse 6. Puffed up in favor of one against another.

Paul now moves on slightly different topic in the next verses, but still on the theme of boastfulness. The boastfulness of the Corinthians has been evident in the way they've viewed their Christian leaders.

But now he picks up more broadly their boastfulness about their own spiritual gifts and experiences in the verses of the rest of this chapter. He says in verse 7, The implied answer is nobody.

[11 : 50] What do you have that you did not receive? The implied answer is nothing. And if you received it, why do you boast as if it was not a gift?

Well, for no reason. It's good in Greek because you can write a question with the answer implied. It would be handy for exams if that was always the case, I'm sure. What Paul is saying there is that you Corinthians are boasting as though you're spiritually mature and superior, that the things that you've received are as if they're your own achievement, or you've been worthy of what you've been given.

And hence you're boasting about those things. In some senses, the Corinthians are doing exactly what the Israelites were warned not to do as well. They'll warn that when they went into the promised land, they would receive a land full of blessing and abundance.

And in time your crops will grow and multiply, your flocks and herds will multiply, you'll become even more prosperous in the land. And then take care lest you say in your heart that my power and the strength of my hand have gotten me this wealth.

That is, it's a gift from God graciously given, but you'll end up boasting as though it's your own achievement. And that's what Paul, I think, is warning these Corinthians that they are doing.

[13 : 11] They've received many gracious gifts from God, far more than they deserve. In fact, any gift from God, in fact, the word gift in Greek has got the sense of grace behind it, unmerited and undeserved.

Don't boast in what God has given you. Don't boast in what you receive. It isn't a reflection of your maturity, superiority, or anything that you can boast in at all.

Paul, in fact, goes from three questions in verse 7 to three exclamations in verse 8 with a sort of parody, a sarcastic or ironic sort of parody of their boastfulness.

Already you have all you want. Already you've become rich. Quite apart from us, you've become kings. As though somehow they're boasting already they have made the kingdom of heaven.

As though they're already ruling with everything, fully perfect almost. Paul is delaying that sense that, in this letter, in fact, that the fullness of God's gifts will only be manifest when the Lord returns.

[14 : 23] But they're boasting already they have all of this. Spiritually mature. So they are claiming to be. But it's out of place, is what Paul is saying.

And he uses his own experience as a sort of shock comparison. You're claiming that you're spiritually mature because of all these gifts and comforts and provisions that you've got.

Well, how about us apostles? If anyone's mature, you would expect the apostles to be. Well, let's

look at the apostles and see what are they like. Firstly, he says at the end of verse 8, I wish that you

had become kings so that we might be kings with you.

That is, Paul is saying, I'm not a king. We're not ruling as kings, we apostles. How can you claim to be? And then in verse 9, For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death because we've become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ. But you're wise in Christ. We're weak. But you are strong. You're held in honor.

[15 : 37] But we're in disrepute. To the present hour, we're hungry and thirsty. We're poorly clothed and beaten and homeless and grow weary from the work of our own hands.

And you're boasting back in verse 8, he says, You have all you want. What a comparison to make. Now, Paul's not complaining about being an apostle.

He's not complaining about his lot here. But he's explaining or showing, mentioning the reality. We apostles, that most people would assume are some sort of spiritual experience and maturity, we're not like you.

We're not boasting in what we've got. We're actually fairly deprived. Part of that is what Paul has been prepared to give up for the sake of the gospel. To travel around the ancient world, preaching and teaching and seeking to bring people to Christ.

He's not complaining about that. But by contrast with the Corinthians, he's trying to bring them down a peg or two in their boastfulness. Some of what Paul is expressing comes a little bit from persecution, in particular the verses that follow at the end of verse 12 and 13.

[16 : 45] Paul is giving us a challenging example, I think, here in passing about how to respond to persecution and reviling.

So often, my temptation is to give as good as I get. To get angry in response to anger shown because I'm a Christian or something like that. But Paul here is demonstrating exactly the principles that Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount.

And I think the allusions to the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' teaching there are quite deliberate and quite clear. that Paul is actually setting before the Corinthians Jesus' standards because they've forgotten them and lost them.

And they're boasting about their comfort and their wealth and their spiritual abundance. But actually he says, that's no sign of maturity. And your boastfulness, in fact, is a sign of immaturity as a Christian as well.

It's not too difficult to detect some Corinthian traits in churches today. The confusion of wealth and comfort and luxury as though that's God's blessing because we deserve it in some way.

[18 : 14] And leads to a sense of comforting pride or boastfulness. Maybe not quite the Muhammad Ali type, but a sort of, well, yeah, we've made it. We've done pretty well.

Sometimes this sense of being puffed up with biblical knowledge as though that has made us spiritually mature because we know things and we are proud about that. Paul challenged the Corinthians by his own example as an apostle to shock them into realizing that actually they're not spiritually mature and their boastfulness is misplaced.

I can't challenge you with my example, but there are plenty of examples in our world today that should shock us as Christians, that should jolt us out of our lethargy, our complacency, our comfort or our pride.

Think of the Indian Christians persecuted this week in Orissa state when it seems that Maoist rebels killed a Hindu leader, the Hindus took it out on the Christian community in a state of India that is already persecuting Christians quite severely.

It's where the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his sons were killed a few years ago. The brother of one of the students at the college I've taught at in India is a pastor in that state.

[19 : 39] His body this week was cut into pieces as part of the retaliation. Women were raped, burned alive, dozens of churches destroyed and many Christians have fled for fear of their lives.

That sort of example should not only shock us but should make us reflect on our own priorities and where we stand with God. I think of a Burmese man who's settled in Melbourne still waiting for his wife and children to come here but he's already started a church that I preached at in June in Ringwood.

Burmese, Falam Chin dialect church 45 people some of them are now becoming Christians very poor people but he's spending all his spare time when he's not working establishing and starting this church and actually the comparison with our laziness and comfort and so on is quite stark when

I've met him and talked with him.

Or I think of homeless Burmese Christians who rather than bemoan their lot when the cyclone destroyed their villages went out and brought relief to others including Buddhists and non-believers and it's seen a sort of gentle wave of conversion since the cyclone because Buddhists haven't done that to other Buddhists but the Christians are the ones who are showing the generosity and that again is a stark jarring reminder to me about how tightly we hold on to our comforts and how proud and complacent we can think ourselves to be.

Paul is shocking the Corinthians with his own example and these examples just a handful should be things that shock us and move us to be more generous and more disciplined and less comfortable and less proud about our state of life and spiritual superiority.

[21 : 41] Well if Paul has been somewhat sarcastic in that paragraph in order to jolt the Corinthians out of their pride and boastfulness he moves to being rather tender in the final paragraph of this chapter.

He's not seeking to shame the Corinthians but he is trying to admonish them to rebuke them. He reminds them that he's like their spiritual father and that his words are motivated therefore by tender love.

He's not a father in the sense of authority father knows best you do this this and this but rather a father in the sense that through him and his preaching that church has actually begun and people were converted from paganism.

Some of them in Corinth it seems think arrogantly because he's not come back and so they're dismissive of Paul and what he teaches. But Paul says I am coming back soon God willing and I've sent Timothy to you in the meantime a faithful servant of God.

Paul remains tender for them he remains full of love for them the fact that he's not yet returned he's in Ephesus where he's planted that church as we read in Acts 19 he hasn't yet come back to Corinth but he will he comes back at least twice that we know of later in history so he says in verse 14 I'm not writing this to make you ashamed but to admonish you as my beloved children for though you might have 10,000 guardians in Christ you do not have many fathers indeed in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel through preaching and through you coming to faith that is I appeal to you then be imitators of me and for this reason I sent you Timothy who's my beloved and faithful child in the Lord to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus as I teach them everywhere in every church but some of you thinking that I'm not coming to you have become arrogant but I will come to you soon if the Lord wills and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power this letter is a bit like a warning before he comes will you get your act together before I come for the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power what would you prefer am I to come to you with a stick a rod or a whip or will I come in a spirit of gentleness are you going to get your act together before I come is what he's warning them he's dismissive of their arrogant talk not because words are unimportant but because their arrogant talk is full of boastfulness what matters he says for the kingdom of heaven is power not talk not idle boast but power what's the power that Paul's referring to the power of success of wealth and abundant blessing and comfort no not at all the success of a huge and growing church and multiple conversions no that's not the power he's referring to either the power of spiritual experience of speaking in tongues and gifts of prophecy and so on that's not the power either that Paul's referring to he says

[25 : 01] I'll find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power for the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power the very power that Paul has made clear in the opening chapters of this letter for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God we proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles but to those who are the call both Jew and Greek Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God that's the power that Paul is looking for the power of the cross the power of Christ crucified not just the power of seeing someone converted or the power of seeing somebody forgiven for their sins but the power of the gospel of God is powerful to make wise for salvation powerful to transform into the likeness of Christ on the final day that's what

Paul's looking for not the boast of spiritual maturity not idle proud talk but the power of the cross changing lives for spiritual maturity is unlike the Corinthian thinking not about spiritual experience spiritual maturity is the fruit of the power of the cross of Christ spiritual maturity is not as the Corinthians thought to boast already we've made it we're kings we have everything we want no rather spiritual maturity awaits the final day for now we see but in a mirror dimly spiritual maturity is

not something to boast about indeed and ironically the very boast of spiritual maturity is evidence of spiritual immaturity and a failure to understand the wisdom and power of the gospel of Christ because at the heart of the Christian life is the gospel of Christ crucified it's a stumbling block and foolishness because the cross of

Christ is about undeserved grace and therefore there is nothing to boast about people stumble over it because it's unmerited and undeserved people think it's foolish because God chooses the weak in the world but it is powerful because it saves the weak and the helpless the undeserving and it's wise this gospel of Christ crucified it's wise because it leaves us no room for boasting other than boasting in the Lord himself if you read through the whole of the letter of 1 Corinthians you'll see this persistent thread of the boastfulness of the Corinthian church and Christians in all sorts of different ways we've seen warnings of it time and again already in this letter as Paul explained what the gospel was about in chapter 1 he said in verse 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God and then went on to finish chapter 1 saying and let the one who boasts boast in the Lord and we saw last week in chapter 3 verse 18 don't deceive yourselves if you think you're wise that is don't be arrogant or boastful about your wisdom verse 21 of chapter 3 let no one boast about human leaders the very thing the Corinthians were doing and today we've seen it again in chapter 6 at the end so that none of you will be puffed up boastful that is in favour of one against another the end of verse 7 why do you boast as if it were not a gift and then as we saw in verses 18 and 19 these people in Corinth who become arrogant full of arrogant talk and then in chapter 5 we'll see next week chapter 5 verse 2 you are arrogant chapter 5 verse 6 your boasting is not a good thing and so it goes on when Paul comes to

Corinth will he see the power of God and if so what will it show itself like the power of God the power of the cross the power of the gospel will transform lives and it will be evidenced primarily in love you see love is kind love as we know is patient love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude love does not insist on its own way love is not irritable or resentful does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth those famous words that Paul wrote later in this letter which we so often just take out of context as beautiful poetry for a wedding was a stern rebuke to a loveless people a boastful people for the very things that love is in chapter 13 they were not and we see all of those things mentioned in the previous chapters as indeed we're seeing today in chapter 4 as well the lack of love is a lack of spiritual maturity and that is what the Corinthians were evidencing and it's the power of the cross of Christ that will produce the fruit of such love in fact the gospel itself defines that love because God loved the world and Christ's death on the cross is a demonstration of that love and the cross of Christ produces love that's how powerful it is when we embrace it with faith and Paul is saying for all your spiritual experiences and your boasts of spiritual maturity without love what do you have you see if I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels but do not have love I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal and if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains the sorts of things the Corinthians were boasting about but do not have love I am nothing if I give away all my possessions if I hand over my body so that I may boast but do not have love

[31 : 48] I gain nothing Paul is beginning to work towards that conclusion in this letter pride boastfulness have no place in the Christian life they are evidence of spiritual immaturity and they are evidence of lovelessness when Paul goes back to Corinth what will he find will he need to arrive with a stick or with love in a spirit of gentleness and if Paul came here to us in comfortable Doncaster what would he find spiritual maturity evidenced by humble sacrificial love fruit of the gospel of Christ crucified or would he find worldly boasting and worldly wisdom and worldly pride pride