

2 Cor 11 16- 33 Folly in the Church

Intro

Last week we began looking at Chapter 11, noting that two words are used several times: danger and fool or foolish. Paul wrote this letter to address issues caused by the challenge from people he calls “super apostles”. They weren’t apostles at all, but they were super speakers. They influenced the church with their charisma and style, but with false doctrine, and they rubbished Paul on several fronts. They looked down on his unprofessional way of speaking and his dogged reliance on the scriptures above human logic. They resented his reliance on the gospel that drove out forms of worship and practices that caused people to rely on the spurious teachers and superstition rather than Christ. And they rubbished Paul’s lifestyle: he was poor and opposed by the authorities. It’s as though they said surely all Paul’s opponents can’t be wrong – it’s Paul who is at fault! And they called Paul a fool.

So last week we examined the dangers Paul lists in this chapter, and now he turns to his defense of being accused as a fool.

He starts on a strong footing v16:

¹⁶I repeat: let no one take me for a fool

It’s very similar to the start of the chapter

¹I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness, but you are already doing that.

This section is full of irony: he almost plays the part they accuse him of in order to demolish their view.

Look at v16 again:

¹⁶I repeat: let no one take me for a fool, but if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool so that I may do a little boasting.

If I am to be treated as a fool, let’s go the whole way, says Paul. You’d have sympathy with a simpleton: you’d patiently smile and tolerate him, so now do me that small justice, claims Paul.

¹⁹You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!

Now with that platform for defense established, let’s see how Paul shapes up.

Point 1: World’s view is to be open and tolerant – (v20, 21)

Paul’s first observation from the “fool’s platform” is that the Corinthians in their great wisdom put up with fools because they (the Corinthians) were so wise! They are so tolerant of fools that they even

²⁰put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face

Who is the fool in this situation? Their supposed tolerance has allowed abuse: it has stolen their ability to make sober judgement: it has robbed them of dignity or credibility. *Anyone* who comes along is welcomed, but not challenged or reviewed. The Corinthians have become enslaved by their tolerance and held captive to anyone’s ideas except the right ones. Who is the fool in this situation?

Now of course, the question of tolerance is a hot topic in England right now. There is a right place for tolerance, but tolerance over doctrine is not the right place. We should not let the

broadly beneficial concept of tolerance seep into also being tolerant of changes to the gospel and the morality that stems from it.

See how Paul has parodied their situation. I doubt that they have been physically slapped but spiritually they have been. They have been taken advantage of. Preaching the truth is reduced to an exchange of views and a debate over who might be right and seeking common ground. Any absolute has disappeared: the view that this is God's gospel has vanished. They are left vulnerable and exposed, and they became enslaved and exploited.

The real fool is the one who loses sight of the truth in the debate over tolerance.

Point 2: World's view over qualifications and heritage – the big question is are they servants of Christ? v21b – 23a

The next issue of foolishness concerns rank or status. It seems that the false teachers laid emphasis on their religious background. They were Hebrews, and it is possible that they suggested that because they were Hebrews they had superior insight into the Hebrew writings – better than the Greeks in Corinth anyway. It became a question of who has the best credentials to teach the gospel. The same argument raged in Philippi, and in his letter to that Church (Phil 3:4) Paul gave a more detailed account of his Jewish background – and it was impressive, in his ancestry and elite education. But that sort of lineage isn't where Paul wants to focus. If we play that game, I win, says Paul, but instead of heritage, let's ask a different question to look at the credentials of leaders.

²³*Are they servants of Christ?*

Never mind rich ancestry, or education, are you a servant? And are you a servant of Christ? That is a penetrating question to ask – are you a servant of Christ?

It means asking whether Jesus' interests and commands rule your life or whether you pick and choose. Of course, a servant cannot pick and choose – they obey. So, are leaders actually obeying Christ – in detail, without excuse or deviation?

Whoever influences you in your choices – the way you spend time, or energy – is that person who imposes on your time and heart – a servant of Christ? Because if not, there will be a different course or set of choices advocated, possibly leading you away from Jesus.

Now it's also a question we need to ask about ourselves too – are you a servant of Christ? What you choose to get involved in will be determined by how you answer – who or what you follow. How you get involved in Jesus' work – your attitude and willingness will be shown by your answer. What you think is the right course of action in church matters will all be coloured by your answer to this question – are you a servant of Christ? Are you seeking His direction or pushing your own opinions?

Point 3: World's view about hardship 23b – 27

I have just finished reading an account of the scaling of the North Face of the Eiger, by what is known as "the direct route" and it took place in the mid-1960's. I know – I have been on it, that you can get to the top by a train that tunnels through from Kleine Scheideg and worms its way past a set of holes in the cliff face - windows – to the top. Those windows are escape routes for stuck climbers and access points for rescue teams. This attempt and a few earlier

attempts didn't use the train like me: they aimed to reach the top by scampering straight upwards from the base. They had the idea that since the face is so steep, they wanted to follow the route that a stone dropped off the top would follow – no deviation to use “easier” slopes. The first third of the book lists the history of failed attempts, and so many deaths I lost count. In the team that succeeded, one died, a couple were injured, and others lost bits of them to frost-bite.

That's one sort of hardship. It is voluntary, not externally imposed but it isn't the kind of hardship Paul speaks of in verses 23-27.

His accusers claim Paul's lifestyle is folly – Paul is foolish to go through all that hardship. And yet it seems that they aren't really aware of the extent of his hardships - so he lists it all. Look at the repeated issues. He presumably lost count of the number of prison detentions. Five times he was sentenced to 39 lashes with a whip. One such sentence would seem excessive, but five times! Three times he was beaten with rods. Those who climbed the Eiger's North Face didn't say “OK lads, who is up for doing it again!” No. It was a personal challenge: ticked off: done: closed. Paul knew the dangers, had experienced them before, and then went through it again, and again and again. Was it foolish? The world would say, “yes, it was”. So why did Paul do that?

The answer is he went through all that again and again because he is a servant of Christ. He followed Jesus, trusted Jesus and was vindicated in the trust he placed in Jesus.

But there's another reason as he tells us in verse 11 –

¹¹why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

The greatest need in that region – as in ours – was that people hear the great news of the gospel. Paul so loved them that he would endure all that hardship to tell them the great news of the gospel and see the implications of belief worked out in those new churches. It reflects Jesus' words we looked at last week in John 3:16

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life

That's where being a servant of Jesus takes you – taking the same commitment to Jesus' message that Jesus had, and Paul had: It meant living it out whatever the cost.

The big question for us is will we take up that challenge to be Christ's servants at whatever cost and in spite of being labelled as foolish?

Point 4: World's view about the church – v28

Now the next folly is how to look at the church. Is it really a great concern to us? Listen to Paul

²⁸Besides everything else I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.²⁹Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin and I do not inwardly burn?

Paul says “beside everything else” I have concern for the church. Among all the other pressures of beatings and persecution and hunger and shipwrecks, he has the daily pressure of concern for the church. He puts that concern alongside, on a par with all those hardships. Imagine his inner decision-making process: “shall I go to that church to help them and be beaten up again, or shall I stay here in safety?” His concern for them won. He feels for them: he feels the weakness of those who are weak, and if someone is led into sin, he

“inwardly burns”. He raises these concerns to be a pressure right up there along with all the other hardships!

In Acts 20:23, 24 Paul speaks about hardship like this: -

²³I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴However, I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.

Of course, most Christians in England may not be called to endure such hardship, but we are called to such discipleship. Christians in other parts of the world do make that choice today. A key question for us is whether our concern for the church is higher than for our own comfort and safety? Do we have such a desire to see the church stand squarely and firmly on the gospel of grace: to see the church live out it’s witness to that grace in any and every situation? From this passage, that concern should be ours because it is a mark of being Jesus’ servant. And if we have such a concern, how far will we go to see the church grow?

Point 5: World’s view about being “strong” v30,31

Now given all Paul’s hardships and persecutions, how does he handle it? He could brag about how tough he is: how lucky for the church to have such a physically strong champion who can withstand all these setbacks. I wonder how we might interview such a person as Paul if he applied to work in our benefice? Would we think he was weak and foolish and not robust enough to be the Chief Exec of a new church movement against such opposition?

Now look where Paul turns this argument.

³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”

Wouldn’t it be great to be called to an easy life? Is there a reason why can’t we have an easy life? Paul has already addressed that in 2 Cor 4:7

⁷but we have this treasure in jars of clay (referring to his own strength and ability – it’s like a clay pot – very fragile)... we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us

God does things in this way so that there is no doubt that He is active, and church growth doesn’t depend on our skills and abilities. Yes, we have skills, gifts and abilities, but they are given by God and again we are to use them to highlight His power not ours.

Now to try to draw all this together, let me finish with a question. If you had free rein, which team would you pick to make our benefice grow? What are the attributes we might want? The world seeks visible strengths, but it isn’t how God works. He looks for people like this:-
Isaiah 66:2 This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word

If we want to see God at work here, the ball is in our court, to be the people we should be in servanthood to Jesus, trust in His word, and willingness to follow whatever the cost. If He chooses to bless, then nothing will prevent it.

