

The Foolishness of Pride

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

Have you ever had an experience of being over confident about something and end up looking like a fool?

That has happened to me on more than one occasion and sometimes it has happened in front of a decent size group of people.

It happened to me once when I was teaching in the electrical apprenticeship program at Fanshawe College.

The class was electrical theory and there were sixty electrical apprentices in the room for the class.

We had been working on how to calculate the voltage, current, and resistance of a circuit.

We had gotten to place where we were working on circuits of medium difficulty and some of the students had gotten to the place where they believed they no longer needed to pay attention.

At the same time there were still students who were having a hard time and needed to keep practicing.

I asked a fellow teacher, “What do you think I can do to get the guys who think they know it all to pay more attention?”

He said, “Give them this!” He handed me a piece of paper with a very large and very complicated circuit.

I thought it was a great idea and thought it would put at least some of them in their place.

In the next class we began with the medium level circuits and I was just waiting for the trouble makers to start with the distracting behavior.

Sure enough it happened and that is when I said, “Ok, let’s see if you can figure out this one.”

I took me at least ten minutes to draw the circuit and it took up two full chalk boards.

It had the desired effect. The students who thought they knew it all worked at it for a very long time and couldn’t get to the answer.

I was delighted with the outcome, but then it came time to take up the question on the board.

This is where my over confidence turned me into a fool.

You see I had made in through trade school and got a 100% on almost every theory test I had ever written and I was so confident in my ability to solve the circuit that I didn’t work it out ahead of time.

So I began to work out the problem on the board and it took at least 20 minutes and all the while I was thinking to myself how smart I was for being able to solve the problem for the first time in front of the class.

Here is the thing. I had made a mistake very early on in the circuit but that did not become apparent until I got to the very last step when the numbers did not add up the way they were supposed to and at that moment it became obvious to everyone in the class that we had just wasted the better part of half an hour.

Of course the smart alecks took full advantage and began questioning my ability to teach the class.

Worse yet I could not for the life of me see where I had gone wrong and so the class came to an end with me looking like a fool and my credibility with the students took a huge hit for the rest of that term.

It is one of many times in my life where I came face to face with the truth of the Bible.

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. (Prov. 16:18 ESV)

[I'm guessing most if not all of you can relate to an experience like that. Pride makes us into fools. That can be a difficult lesson to learn, but I am fully convinced that learning it on this side of eternity is an act of God's grace in our lives. Whether we know it or not pride is something we all struggle with and it can cause absolute ruin in our lives if we are complacent about it. In our text this morning **2 Corinthians 11:16-33** we are confronted with the foolishness of pride in a somewhat unusual way. The apostle Paul follows the instruction of Proverbs 26:5 which says, "*Answer a fool according to his folly*" in order to teach the church some important lessons about pride. He has at least three lessons about the negative impact of pride and one positive lesson about realizing the foolishness of pride. Here is the first negative impact...]

Point #1 – Making much of ourselves leads us away from Jesus. (Verses 16-17)

If we think rightly about and truly love Who Jesus is and if we also have any sense of who we are before a holy God, then we will desire humility and despise pride.

The words 'I repeat' at the beginning of verse 16 remind us that Paul has already started into this line of teaching earlier in the chapter.

After a bit of an aside he dives deep into his lesson on foolishness.

Listen to what he writes in **verse 16**.

If we evaluate Paul's life from the worldly perspective of the culture of Corinth we would think him a fool.

We would see a man who voluntarily gave up a life of prosperity for a life of suffering with no earthly sign of reward.

That is likely what the fake apostles who had worked their way into the church were saying about the man.

Don't listen to him he is a fool.

The truth is he is the furthest thing from a fool, but if that is how they see it he wants to use that to show them what foolishness really is.

One of the things fools do is they brag about themselves, which is what he means here by the word 'boasting'.

What he is saying is this, "Ok let me play the part of a fool for a minute to show you how foolish these false apostles are."

[Parents will sometimes employ this lesson to teach their children. Imagine a child lies to his mother and his mother has tried to correct him but he has refused to listen. So his mother says, "Son you know I've told you lying is wrong, but I am going to lie to you to show you how bad it is." The boy says, "Ok" thinking it is not that big of a deal. A few hours later his mom says, "I have some ice cream in the freezer would you like to have a big bowl of it." He says, "Yes!" and off he goes to the freezer only to discover that there is no ice cream. Later his mom says, "Your best friend is coming over in a bit to play would you clean up your room to be ready?" "Yes I will, I can't wait till he gets here!" The boy says. After a while he asks, "When will my friend get here?" And his mom says, "He was never coming! Now do you see the problem with lying?"]

That is what Paul is about to do here, but before he does he wants to make sure that they understand that what he is about to do is a demonstration of foolishness to show them that the pride of his opponents is something to steer clear of rather than admire.

He makes that clear in **verse 17**.

Bragging about yourself is not something the Lord Jesus approves us in His people.

In fact the Bible says very clearly that "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*" (1Peter 5:5)

The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. (Ps. 31:23)

The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate. (Prov. 8:13)

God hates it when we make much of ourselves and it is impossible to embrace, promote, or encourage what the Lord hates and be growing closer to Him in a relationship.

That is really the heart of pride. When we think a great deal of ourselves, then we will be blind to our desperate need of the LORD.

Is there anything more foolish than that? Is that not the heart of what leads to eternal destruction?

Paul knows it and that is why he says that this kind of bragging is speaking like a fool.

[Sooner or later pride comes at a personal cost. It is a great measure of God's glorious grace if we experience the personal cost of pride on this side of eternity and it opens our eyes to how foolish it is to make much of ourselves. If not, sooner or later we will come before the Living God and give an account of ourselves before Him. The personal cost of pride is high to say the least, but like all sin it concerns more than just us. That is the second negative impact of this foolishness, that...]

Point #2 – Self-promotion costs others. (Verses 18-21a)

When we point people to ourselves instead of the LORD we bring them harm..

Paul proceeds with his lesson of foolishness in verses 18-19.

It would seem there was no shortage of people who liked to talk themselves up in the ancient world and it would seem that several of them had worked their way into the church at Corinth.

Not only had they worked their way in but the church it says here “gladly bears” meaning they happily put up with people making much of themselves.

Making matters worse Paul says to them, “You guys are doing this ‘being wise yourselves!’”

What he probably means by that is that they are thinking themselves wise by tolerating what they are.

Being wise in our own eyes is a bad place to be because it blinds us to reality.

That was clearly happening in Corinth. Look at what bearing with boastful men has gotten them in **Verse 20**.

These prideful men gained influence in the church by talking themselves up and were using that influence to bring harm to these believers.

They were working at making believers ‘slaves.’

He likely means ‘slaves’ in the spiritual sense. Typically how this happens is that people devise some kind works based salvation by which they gain control over people.

They twist a call to a holy life by the grace of God into checklist of their own making.

Fail to keep their list and your fall out of favor with God.

That is slavery.

Besides making them slaves he also says these men are “devouring [and] taking advantage” of these believers.

This probably means they are asking for and receiving substantial sums of money and in some cases taking everything from some believers.

He says these men “put on airs” meaning they act superior to other believers.

They acts like lords and rulers over people seeing themselves as being able to treat people however they want.

When he says they, “strike you in the face” that may be actually hitting people in the face or it could mean unnecessary humiliation but either way it is clearly bad.

That is the inevitable result of people making much of themselves because when a human being makes himself his top priority that is going to come at the cost of others and the more power he gains the greater the pain he will inflict.

[Jesus knew this better than anyone, which is why He put His disciples in their place when they were thinking about themselves. Remember James and John sent their mom to talk to Jesus and ask Him to make them to most important guys in the kingdom next to Jesus? Remember how the other guys responded? The Bible says they became “indignant” which means they were really upset. The bible doesn’t say why they were upset but it is most likely because they wanted the top position. They were concerned with themselves. Jesus tells them that it is the way of unbelievers to want to be lord over others. He says, “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”]

The apostle knows this and so he says this in **first part of verse 21**, I believe we are supposed to hear a hint of sarcasm here.

When the apostle was with the Corinthians he didn’t make much of himself, he served them and sacrificed for them.

His opponents put on a better show, but they had no concern for the good of the church.

Be very wary brothers and sisters of people who name the name of Jesus and yet make much of themselves.

Be very wary brothers and sisters of the pride in our own hearts.

It is a very easy thing to put ourselves and the center of our attention and when we do that we can very easy bring harm to other people.

[It is easy to go down that road because it is the default of our sinful nature to make ourselves our top priority. Oh how we need the grace of God to show us the foolishness of pride and walk in humility instead. That brings us to a third big problem with pride. It leads us away from Jesus, it harms others, and thirdly...]

Point #3 – In making much of ourselves we make too much of ourselves. (Verses 22-29)

When we think highly of ourselves we always fail to see ourselves rightly.

Having shown them the harm these boastful men are bringing into the church, it is time to see how well their boasting stacks up.

Paul does this by comparing them to himself all the while reminding them that boasting about yourself is foolishness. **(Verse 21b)**

These guys think they are so great, let's compare resumes.

One of their boasts had to do with being Jewish so Paul says this in **verse 22.**

Mention of being Hebrew here likely had to do with language. Many Israelites in Paul's day only spoke Greek, but Greek is not the original language of the Old Testament and so being literate in Hebrew would have been seen as a badge of honor.

Paul has that.

“Are they Israelites?” He asks. Probably meaning that they claimed the covenant promises of the God.

Paul has that.

“Offspring of Abraham” indicates being born Jewish rather than being converts.

Paul has that.

In whatever way they were boasting about being Jewish Paul could match them or better them in every respect.

Next he asks this at **the beginning of Verse 23.** (stop at ‘madman’)

It's crazy to talk like this is his point but he feels it is the best way to show his opponents to be the frauds that they are.

These guys talk themselves up, but how much have they really sacrificed for Jesus?

Paul gives his resume in **verses 23b-27.**

When Jesus called Paul to be an apostle He said, “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” and this list shows us what that looked like.

It is hard to even imagine surviving this list let alone pressing on in the ministry.

Commentator Murray Harris describes Paul's suffering as the ‘seal of his apostleship’.

I mean how could a person keep going after all that?

The only answer that makes any sense is that he was being sustained by the Spirit of God.

In addition to the physical burdens there is also the spiritual as well. (Verse 28-29)

He is constantly concerned for believers and their relationship with the LORD.

Compare that with these prideful men. Could they say that serving Jesus had cost them anything?

Could they say they had worked anywhere close to this hard for the Lord?

Do they have anywhere near the affection for believers that Paul does?

Not at all. They thought highly of themselves but when put beside the apostle they can't stack up.

[Every now and again I will see a video of boxers doing a media appearance before their fight where one boxer is really trash talking the other. After a minute or two of trash talk video, it changes to the actual fight. Before the fight begins there is more trash talking and then the fight starts and in less than a minute the trash talker is getting pummelled and loses the fight in a matter of seconds. He talked a big game but was nowhere near as good as he thought he was.]

That is what pride will do to us. It will make us think we are better than we are.

The Bible tells us that we ought to think of ourselves with "sober judgement", that is we should to try and think of ourselves with as much objective accuracy as possible.

Feeding pride in our lives makes that impossible and it is so easy to do.

One of the most common ways we can fall into this trap is by looking around at others and saying to ourselves, "I'm better than that person and that person and that person."

That is foolishness, Paul calls it insanity here in verse 23.

Another way we can do it is by looking to our worldly credentials.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard people say, "I have such and such degree, or that qualification, or so many years' experience."

Those things can be good but they can also be a source of groundless boasting which is foolishness.

[There are plenty of people with PHD's in theology that are leading people to hell because they have abandoned the word of God. We need to be very wary of people who make much of themselves and we need to fight against making much of ourselves because no good comes from it only harm both to ourselves and others. So how do we do that? How can we fight

against the foolishness of pride? These last few verses of this chapter give us some help in that regard. [Where making much of ourselves is the way of foolishness...]

Point #4 – Knowing our weakness leads to wisdom. (Verses 30-33)

When we can begin to see how severe our limitations are, we can begin to see that we are dependant creatures who need the Self-existent God for everything in life.

Before Paul came to know Jesus he probably thought himself to be pretty smart and strong.

I get that from his description of himself in Galatians 1 and Philippians 3.

He was moving up through the ranks of society as a Pharisee and had lots of worldly credentials behind his name.

He would have had lots to boast about, but having met Jesus and having walked with Him for many years he says this instead. **(Verses 30-33)**

When Paul thinks of himself as a servant of the LORD he isn't thinking about how great he is which I find amazing considering the list he just gave us regarding his service to Christ.

If he had fed the pride of his heart he could have easily thought to himself that he had done all this on his own, but instead he saw the truth, he was seeing himself in the same way that God was seeing him.

He saw himself as weak and was intentionally directing his attention to those things.

He even goes back to when he first became a Christian and was preaching in the city of Damascus.

His message was not well received by the governor of the city and he was in danger of being arrested.

With the city gate guarded some of Paul's followers get the idea to let him out through a window lowering him in a basket.

Hardly the image of a brave conquering hero is it.

I think he reminds them of that story to show them that he has been keenly aware of his weakness from the earliest days of his conversion.

It is when we are able to truly see our weakness that we start to wise up as human beings.

[Have you ever wondered why God brings us into the world the way He does? No doubt we could come up with a number of reasons, but one of the things it does is it shows us how utterly dependant we are as human beings. When a baby is in the womb he/she has no ability to defend or provide for himself or herself. After a baby is born little changes for quite some time. Babies need their parents especially their mother don't they? Human beings are indeed "fearfully and wonderfully made" as it says in Psalm 139 but we are fools if we are amazed with ourselves instead of our Creator who designed us to show our need of Him.]

You know the truth of it is that we need the LORD throughout our entire existence more than a baby needs his mother.

That is true of all our physical needs which the LORD provides for us and He does that every day for people who refuse to acknowledge Him.

It is also true of our spiritual need as well.

The reality is every single one of us are completely powerless to do a single thing about any of the offenses that we have committed against the LORD.

We have no power or strength or wisdom to deal with our problem of sin.

If we can see that and God according to His glorious grace opens our eyes to His incomparable power that He exercised in the Person and Work of Jesus, then we will begin to walk in the way of wisdom.

We need that desperately because it is so easy and it is so tempting to make much of ourselves.

It is so tempting to think highly of ourselves and try and convince others to do the same.

If we do that though we end up walking in the way of a fool.

Pride is foolish because it leads us away from the Lord, it harms others which invites God's judgment, and it makes us think we are better than we are.

There is only foolishness in pride, but if by grace we see how utterly weak and helpless we truly are we can find wisdom that leads to eternal life.

May God give us all eyes to see and hearts to understand.