

FOOLS FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

"We are fools for Christ's sake." (I Corinthians 4:10).

The word "fool", as used in the Bible, does not imply mental weakness, but moral wickedness and corruption. According to the Bible, fools are those who play fast and loose with holy things. Such folk are still with us, and God's Word, which is always up-to-date, holds up their foolhardiness as a solemn warning to others.

Only a fool would say there is no God when there are so many evidences of His presence and power. How foolish are those who try to live without God! Foolishness consists of thinking only of this world and having a good time, forgetting that one has an immortal soul. Such a person does not deny the existence of God, but simply lives as if God does not matter. Today millions claim they believe in God, and yet deny His very existence in their lives.

The man who lives without God limits his horizons. His soul matters less than his body. The gratification of physical desires becomes more important than anything else. He lives for today. His motto is "eat, drink, and be merry." Then one day God will have to say to him, "Thou fool!" Any man who ignores God in his daily life is really in all senses denying Him and playing the part of the fool. For him, to all intents and purposes God simply does not exist.

How wonderful that Paul lived for Christ so consistently that he could say to the Corinthians, "If you want to do what is right, just do what I do. Just be followers of me. If you want to serve the Lord Jesus in the way that is going to count, and that will send a thrill through the centuries, then do it the way I am doing it." Very few today have the courage, let alone the life, to be able to say to folks: "If you want to follow the Lord Jesus Christ the right way, if you want to live in such a manner that your life will be as a blazing comet, if you want to live so that your life will have a thrill and glory in it, then live as I do," and yet not have any pride or boasting in it. Paul was humble when he said that, but he was truthful. What was it in Paul that drove him to such an extremity, that absolutely imperiled his life, that made him what he was, and that caused him to have such an influence on the centuries that followed? It was his devotion to Jesus Christ.

You remember how the friends of Jesus Christ said that He was beside Himself. By that they meant that He was out of His mind. They meant that He had lost Himself to the cause to which He had given Himself. You remember how Festus felt sorry for Paul when the Apostle stood before him and said: "Much learning doth make thee mad." He simply meant that much learning had made Paul a fool, much learning had made him a fanatic, that he had gone too far with the thing, and that he had imbibed too much of it. How glorious that Paul had come to have such a magnificent obsession!

As we study history it comes before our eyes and it throbs again and again in our hearts that the early Christians were possessed of a single-minded devotion to Christ. With all their hearts they believed that He was the only hope of the world. With great fervency they preached the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Paul considered it a compliment when men called him a fool because of his devotion to Christ. Why did Paul enjoy the critics calling him a fool? Because he knew that if the world said he was a fool, God would say that he was wise. It is far better to have the approval of God than to be popular with people. God's Word teaches that a man is not wise unless he knows Christ as his Saviour and is living in accordance with the will of God.

A man who lives for Christ and burns up his life in the Lord's work is called a fool by the world. In the eyes of the Lord that man is very wise and by Him he is greatly loved. If you will lay your life on the altar without hesitation and hold nothing back, the world will call you a fool. But, oh how wonderful! You will have Christ's approval on your life, and you will be wise.

Why are people called fanatics? Because they give themselves so wholeheartedly to somebody or something that they do not seem to have much regard for anything else.

Paul did not need to be a fool for anybody. He was the most gigantic intellect of his day. He was one of the most colossal figures of all time. He was an outstanding personality. Doubtless he could have remained in Tarsus and lived in the luxury that the city could have provided for him. Instead of living in comfort, ease, and luxury, he chose, in their stead, and with his eyes wide open and his brain as clear as an unclouded sky, the beatings, the prisons, the dark and the damp cells, the lonely nights, and the stripes that cut his back, and the blood-stained block on which he laid his head to be severed. As long as he could have the approval of Christ, he was willing to be a fool in the eyes of men. He just wanted to please his Lord.

The reason that Paul's life causes us to sing his praises today, the reason we think of him as the most stalwart figure in Christian preaching, the reason that he gives us the thrill that he does is because he became a fool for Christ's sake. When the world points at us a finger of contempt and says, "You are foolish; you have gone too far with this thing; you are getting fanatical," then get alone some place and thank God, because you are in the way in which He wants you to be.

Perhaps, after Paul's conversion, diplomatic persons went to him and said, "Now, Paul, you know that what has happened to you is wonderful. We are all so glad. But Paul, we just want to tell you something, don't carry this thing too far. A large number of Christians have gone so far that some of them are being fed to the lions. Nero has murdered a lot of them, made them torches to light the city, but Paul, don't you go that far. You won't will you? It is all right to be a Christian, just don't carry it too far."

Paul replied, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself." Paul didn't care. He didn't go around trying to dodge death. He walked right into it. He knew that the Lord was not going to take him home until his time was up and He was through with his ministry for Him. Paul did not have any fears and did not ask any favors. He went right on with his hand in the hand of the Lord Jesus. He was a fool in the eyes of the men of the world, but, as far as the estimate of God was concerned, Paul was the smartest man of his day.

The people applauded Nero as a wise man. They erected monuments to his honor. When he went through the streets of the city the people crowded the curbing in order that they might have just a look at him. They said Nero was a wise man and that Paul was a fool. But the thing has changed so much that when we look back across the centuries and look for a name for a dog, we call the dog "Nero"; but when we want to name our sons, we call them "Paul." But, if Paul had not been a fool for Christ's sake, you never would have heard his name, or known anything about him.

When Pliny wrote the emperor about the early Christians, this is just about the way he said it: "Well now, these Christians are nice people, but they are headed wrong. They just don't know life. They ought to fall into our Roman ways of living, then they would know what life really is." To this day the world has not changed. Today

that is what they are saying. They feel sorry for folks who are out-and-out for Christ. They say, "Poor folks; they are not getting anything out of life."

So frequently those who have been fools for Christ's sake have become heroes. If anybody ever suffered persecution as far as the opinion of the world was concerned, those early pilgrims who came to our shores from England did. Because of the terrible persecution to which they were subjected, they got in a boat and started for a new world. The newspapers in England ridiculed them, said they were a bunch of fools who did not know what they were doing, but they came here to found a country for the glory of God. They undertook their mission on the basis of the Christian faith. Today, we do not call them fools, but men of foresight and vision. In this modern era we call them the great exponents of religious liberty. We think of them as heroes. But, if they had not been fanatics or fools for Christ's sake, they never would have been heroes.

Matthew 14:28-29 speaks to our present-day situation. A ship was being tossed in the fury of the midnight storm: and for the disciples the worst feature of the situation was — Christ was not there.

They had left Him ashore when they embarked. He had taken the road to the hills. He was spending the night in solitary prayer. The disciples wondered how He could know what was happening on the sea. They thought He was totally oblivious of their peril "If only Christ were here!"

And that is the real trouble in the storms of life — to lose your touch with God. Do we not know how those disciples felt? In days of decision, when you have to choose your path for the future and seem flung on your own resources in the critical dilemma, when you cannot make up your mind, and no divine voice guides you through the struggle — "If only Christ were here!" Or in days of stress, anxiety and emotional distraction, when trouble and depression bow the heart and all the world seems dark, and you do not know how you can possibly face what lies ahead — "If only Christ were here!"

Christ is nearer than we think. That night Jesus saw the frail little boat tossing on the sea. He sensed the sudden fury of the storm. He knew the urgent peril of His friends. "And in the fourth watch of the night He went unto them, walking on the sea."

There are those in this service who have encountered Christ on seas as wild and daunting as Gennesaret. It is one of the big discoveries of life, how stress and need and desolation may bring the Master suddenly near. When the whole world is in confusion, as it is today, a boiling sea of troubles, the Lord is there within the shadows keeping watch and able to control. When your life is submerged in perplexities and bewilderments, quite borne down beneath them, then is the time to look up and lift up your head, for you are in the presence of God.

At first the disciples did not recognize Christ. Peering through the lashing tempest and the dark, they thought that He was a portent of ill omen, a spectre of death, the ghost of the grave, and wanted God to take it away. "They cried aloud in terror."

One reason for their lack of recognition of Christ was the incredulity of unbelief. Looking again at that figure coming towards them across the waters, they cried, "No living being can do that! It is positively uncanny. No man alive can walk the

sea!" And their unspoken thought was, "Not even Christ!" Hearing the cry of their incredulity, Christ said, "It is I -- no spirit nor spectre, but Myself -- be not afraid!"

So through the darkness comes a voice that steadies and controls. It is not imagination that invents the presence of God when the sea gets rough. The availability of supernatural grace is not the hallucination of cheap wishful thinking. It is a magnificent, verifiable reality.

With the dramatic impulsiveness of his nature, Peter determined to put this to the test. "Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water." How characteristic of the man! That startling, reckless idea was thoroughly typical. When the other disciples heard what Peter was saying to Christ, and knew what he was proposing to do, most likely they told him what they thought. One can hear them saying, "Get back into the boat, you fool! Have you taken leave of your senses? The thing is mad -- come back!" Had it ended in tragedy, they would have said, "We knew it! Just what we predicted. It was inevitable. It was a crazy act, from start to finish!"

Look at Simon Peter climbing down out of the boat to go to Jesus. Humanly speaking, one might say, "He should not have done it. Some said that Mary should really not have shattered her lovely and precious alabaster box at Jesus' feet; and the four men with the paralytic friend should not have torn up the roof of the house to get him to Jesus when they found all the doorways blocked; and Matthew should not have left his ledgers and his desk and his good income to go off after the Lord Jesus; and Albert Schweitzer should not have buried himself in Central Africa, etc. All of these and many others were fools for Christ's sake.

But there was more in this incident than the blind impulsiveness of love. There was the clear insight of faith. Peter looked at that Figure out across the waters, and there came to him the daring thought -- "If Christ can do that, why not I? Is there any reason why I should not attempt what Christ can do? If He can trample the waves of life beneath His feet, is there not grace enough for me to do it also?"

Of course, with us so often it is different. We look at Christ walking the storms, mastering life's troubles, trampling on its temptations -- and it only depresses us. We say, "It is not for us to think of doing that." And we begin to excuse ourselves to our own satisfaction. We say, "Jesus was different. It was easy for Him to keep calm in the midst of trouble, and pure in the midst of sin, but we need not try to do that. Fancy people like us setting out to live like Christ!" And so we thwart God's purpose to send His supernatural grace coursing through our life and through this broken world which needs that grace so badly.

Christ's "Come" applies to the making of character, and the day-to-day fulfilling of the will of God. "Come and do what I am doing," says Jesus. Here is our standard for life, and we dare not accept a less. "The works that I do shall ye do also." Thus He summons us daily to fresh paths of high adventure, to walk where He walked, to love and trust as He loved and trusted, to serve and embrace the Father's will as He did, to make life lovely with the beauty of holiness, gallant with the gallantry of righteousness, and splendid with the splendor of God. Those who do may be called fools, but they will enjoy the presence, power, blessings, and approval of the Lord.

As long as Peter kept his eyes fixed resolutely on Jesus, he succeeded in his attempt. When he momentarily diverted his attention, and looked at the black terrifying waters

around, things went wrong. He began to sink. Nothing in life can overwhelm the man whose eyes are up to Jesus and who is living in fellowship with Him. When people break contact with Jesus, they begin to sink.

"Beginning to sink." That is the crucial point. The thing had not actually happened. It was only beginning to happen. Outwardly Peter still seemed to be mastering the waves. But he knew the difference. He knew something was going wrong. He was beginning to sink.

It is that stage which is so crucial on the sea of life. Perhaps some of you know that you are losing grip, and that your hold on spiritual ideals is slackening. Your standards are deteriorating. You have lost the blessedness you knew when first you saw and knew the Lord. You would not dream of saying that you have sunk, for you have not, but you are "beginning to sink."

Peter suddenly felt that he was sinking and he cried aloud and above the clamor of the tempest, "Lord, save me!" "Immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand and caught him" -- held him up with that powerful right arm, that mighty rescuing hand that never lost any man who felt its grip. The Master rescued His disciple, and they reached the boat, and the storm died down to calm. And "they that were in the ship worshipped him."