

## TRUTH'S FOOL

We are almost at the end of our series regarding Fool's Paradise. One sermon to go. But before that, I thought we should take a little interlude, step aside to get our bearings, and maybe take time for an important reminder. There is such a thing as Fool's Truth, and a lot of the world is going off after it, most of the time. Most of us are going after it ourselves, at least some of the time. But not nearly as much as we used to.

But when we do not – when we find our truth and live for it – what then? Sometimes we don't ask; we don't want to picture or contemplate that very carefully. What *would* life be like if we did it right? Many people prefer to just unthinkingly assume that the landscape would then be slowly bathed in pastel shades, and we would drift in a quiet river of peace toward prosperity and loving relationships with all whom we met ... our children would be problemless and wonderful, our mates would never complain, our friends would all be true ... we would have plenty of time to do everything we really considered to be important ... and things would get better from there.

Why does Paul say, "*May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy*"? Is Paul wishing upon us a lot of junk we are never going to need? Somehow he expects us to be walking some kind of Path that does not lend itself to pastel shades. This is so hard to explain; if you didn't already know what I was driving at, it would not be possible to put into words.

Paul had a wonderful life. Few humans have ever exhibited more excitement and enthusiasm, more joy in friends, more appreciation and thankfulness for opportunities, more delight in his purpose and destiny. It is hard to imagine Paul waking up very many mornings with a depression that wanted to roll over and go back to sleep. Paul was vibrant, alive, and full of expectation and hope. And *for years* (meaning, no temporary wrinkle of cheap grace or counterfeit conversion) he carried his truth wherever he went – into whatever conditions he encountered – with a joy, a verve, a humble delight that dramatically attracted or dramatically repelled almost everyone who got close to him.

Some of you have listened to jaundiced views that picture Paul as a self-righteous, repressed, anti-female, judgmental jerk. Some people like

to read into others the problems they carry themselves. Nevertheless, we should remember that the strange tendency humans have to pull heroes off of pedestals has its reasons. We do need to protect ourselves from following false gods and false role models. If nobody looks beneath the shining armor, sometimes you get a Jim Jones or a Hitler. But in Paul's case, it does not add up. He did not pretend to be the Christ – he had no desire to be the Christ – he only wanted others to find and know and follow the Christ. The only time Paul ever pointed to himself was when he was hoping others would turn their own lives over to Jesus as much as he had himself. And the big kicker is: How come Paul had so many friends, both male and female? How was he able to start churches across half the known world – I mean, without even a bicycle or a typewriter, never mind a computer, or advertising on national television? Nobody worshipped Paul. We have some fundamentalists today who do, but nobody did back then. They loved him because through him they found the Christ. They loved him because they had found their own relationship to God in Christ Jesus, and he had been the catalyst. They were grateful, but they were not “dependent” on Paul, as we use that term. They would not see him for years on end. They would go on about their lives, trying to live in Christ Jesus, following their own WAY IN HIM. Whatever happened to Paul was not going to change that – not anymore.

Yet Paul's caring and love were deeply returned. How can we explain that? Jeremiah had one friend in all his forty years of ministry. Can you name any of Paul's personal friends? Timothy, Titus, Luke, Barnabas, Tychicus, Silas, Phoebe, Lydia, Onesimus, Philemon, Prisca, Aquila ... we could be here for a while. Track Paul during the end of his third missionary journey. From Corinth to Ephesus to Jerusalem, and every port and town in between, the Christian communities turned out to welcome Paul. It is obvious that they loved him. They wept at the thought that they might not see him again. They wept even more for the danger they thought he was heading into at Jerusalem – fears soon to be totally confirmed. Paul carried no stick of fear or coercion. He gave that up when he was converted. Lots of people disliked Paul, and you can too. You just need to know that the reasons usually given are all false.

Sorry to be so long at my point. Paul had a wonderful life – a life full of adventure, love, friends, purpose, enthusiasm, joy. We can look at that dimension of his life, and it is genuine and true and authentic. Yet superimposed on that picture, almost as if we were playing with transparencies on some classroom overhead projector, we can see another dimension

to Paul's life. Paul lived one of the harshest, toughest lives imaginable: Beaten, stoned, flogged; thrown into prison over and over; cold, hungry, sick, half-blind; no time for a wife or family of his own; estranged, at least for a while, from most of his dearest friends and relatives; considered a traitor by most of the nation he loved. Paul was also hated with fury by people from one end of the empire to the other. His mere presence at the temple in Jerusalem caused the worst peace-time riot the city had ever seen. More than forty God-fearing, law-abiding, deeply religious men swore they would not eat or drink anything ever again until they had murdered Paul in cold blood without trial or any due process of the Law they held sacred above all other things on earth. Some people did not like him.

You realize we could make the exact same point if we talked about Jesus' life, or Peter's. The question is: Will they be able to make the same point when they talk about *our* lives?

Did Paul live a wonderful life, or a terrible life? He lived both, of course. It just depends on which kind of truth you are looking through. In our kind of world, if we want the undiluted joy of living in Christ Jesus, we have to be ready for that other transparency to be the way a lot of people see us. Let me try that again: If we live in a world where a great many people are following Fool's Truth, then anybody trying to live for God's Truth will seem like an idiot, or irrelevant, or, more likely, evil.

It was, of course, Paul who first used the cryptic phrase, "*We are fools for Christ's sake.*" (I Corinthians 4:10) Today you have to be careful about the inflection, but the point remains: If you live for God's Truth in this world, you will be Truth's Fool in the eyes of most of the world, at least during your own lifetime.

Christian communities of every persuasion have always been aware of this "in but not of the world" duality. I cannot understand how we suddenly have a generation of liberal Christians who seem to be vague, at best, about such realities. I'm not referring to any of you, but it comes, I suspect, from having a generation or two of churchgoers who thought they were so bright and wonderful that they could be Christians and go out and save the world without having to bother with sound theology, prayer, studying the Bible, learning from the saints, or even having much faith in Jesus ... as long as they cared about "loving thy neighbor" (preferably at a safe distance), and had good intentions. How Satan must have licked his chops!

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Not preaching or teaching now, just commenting: Have you ever wondered about some of Jesus' "unpopular" remarks? "*Do not set your pearls before swine, nor give dogs what is holy... Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*" Many, many times, Jesus warns His followers that they must be careful outside the fellowship of His followers. Remember the movie *Witness*? "You be careful out there among them English." The old man had nothing but suspicion and mistrust of John Book when he was first brought onto the farm, wounded. But at the end he loved him. "I want you to know I think of you as one of us," he was saying. "You don't belong out there anymore, with people who think it's okay to hurt each other. If it gets too hard, you know where home is." Meanwhile, "You be careful out there among them English."

Do you ever get off the big story and just watch Jesus wending His way between situations and people? Keeping His peace sometimes; telling this person one thing, that person another, biding His time; moving in with power to help here and there, but never in general, never automatically, never by outside demand or expectation. It is for all the world as if He tracks a truth that most of the world neither sees nor believes. And indeed He is Truth's Fool. He will go to any lengths to track and be true to this truth – what we have come to realize was His link, in prayer, to God. Yes, He would go to any lengths whatsoever. Much of the time – most of the time – even His friends couldn't figure out what He was doing, or why He was doing it that way. They only caught on, over time, because He never stopped doing it that way. And only after the Resurrection did it become clear, to those who found His truth, that in fact He was not a fool. That is, not only was He a nice guy with some fun ideas and a lot of caring, He also knew what He was doing – like nobody the world had ever seen before. "*He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.*" (Colossians 1:13)

So I just wanted to mention that I want you to stop going after Fool's Truth. I want you to go after God's Truth, and to live for the Christ who reveals it. Only, it is imperative for you to know that if you do that in this world, you will end up becoming Truth's Fool.