

**Date:** January 27-28, 2024

**Title:** Virtue or Vice: Foolishness

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 12:11-24

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Good morning. Just before we jump into the teaching here today, we want to just take a moment and let you know how something works here that you may not be familiar with. And that is one of the ways that we pray together, because it's a congregation, and actually it wouldn't matter how big, you can't do everybody's prayer request on a weekend because you would always be praying. Not that that would be a bad thing, but you get the point. There would be a thousand things we'd be praying for. And so, we have a group of people, hundreds of people, who pray for the specific needs that come up. Every week there are dozens of things happening throughout our campuses in people's lives and hundreds of people who pray.

I just mention this because this week I saw several things come through the email, and I was just blown away with the amount of need. Again, just in our church family. And so, I just want to say, if you are ever in a place where you want prayer, you can go to the website, you can contact the church office, and hundreds of people will pray for you and what's going on. If you want to be part of praying for people, you can let the church office know. I think it's available online, and you can receive those emails and pray. But I just want to take a moment and pray for the needs among us. So, would you pray with me?

God, as we're gathered today here in Wexford, in the Chapel, in Butler, the Strip District, Southpointe, Beaver, and Online, there are many needs expressed and many things that probably haven't been expressed. There are health challenges, relational challenges, things going on that are unexpected, and things that are expected that just permeate so many of our lives. And God, we ask that you would work in unmistakable ways and that your glory would be seen in each of these situations. Father, I ask as we're gathered today, that you would speak to each of us, and that you would use my words to reflect your word in content, tone, and emphasis. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Over the last several weeks, we've been looking at the last few chapters of Second Corinthians, and we've called this series *Virtue or Vice*. We've taken some of the words that the Apostle Paul uses in writing to the Corinthians in the book of Second Corinthians. Words like boasting, weakness, and jealousy. We've talked about how we often see these words not as a virtue, but how Paul uses them to express a virtuous idea saying that these are things that when you boast in Christ rather than in the things of this world, when you're jealous for the things of God, when you see weakness as strength, that God can take these things and use them in our lives.

Today we're going to talk about foolishness. And it's another word that Paul uses. And my guess is very few of us would say I'd like to be thought of as foolish. In fact, none of us probably has that as just our default - think of me as a fool. And yet Paul uses this word, and he uses it not just in Second Corinthians, but he uses it in First Corinthians. He uses this word several times in a culture that so valued wisdom that to call somebody foolish was one of the great insults of the day.

Now, again, it's an insult today, but in that day, it was probably even a bigger insult than it is in our day. And foolishness, you know how this works. You can do something that everybody says is foolish, you know is foolish, and end up being foolish. Right? Like, this is the moment when you thought it was a good idea to take your dirt bike and jump over something? I remember doing this as a kid when I took off on a bike and thought I would clear something, didn't clear it, landed, and ripped up my shoulder. It's like, well, I could have told you how that one would end.

Then some things are smart, and everybody thinks they're smart. Such as funding your 401k when you're in your twenties, and the company has matching dollars. That's just smart, and everybody kind of knows it's smart. And if you don't do it, you're just saying I didn't choose to do it. Then there are things thought of as being smart, but they're actually foolish. In other words, a lot of people look at it, and they go oh, that's a great idea. Then you get down the road and say hey, that didn't work out well.

Then there are some things that in our culture and our world, people say that's foolish, but it ends up being smart. And that's how I think Paul is using the word foolish here. He's saying I'm a fool for the way I'm going to talk to you. And he uses foolishness. I said First Corinthians was written in some ways as a corrective to the church at Corinth. Second Corinthians was more autobiographical, but in First Corinthians chapter one, he says the cross is foolishness to those of us who are perishing. And yet it's the wisdom of God to those who are being saved. It's the power of God.

And so, what he says is even coming to Jesus in faith, most people in the world will say that's goofy. In other words, most people will say, the cross, you need Jesus to be your savior, just be a good person, and it'll all work out. And yet the Christian message is that you can be a good person, but being good, no matter how good you are, you won't be good enough. That's why you need what Jesus Christ has done on the cross. That's foolishness in our world. But it's foolish smart if you understand and believe the gospel because you say it may seem foolish, but it is actually where you gain salvation.

I remember when my wife and I were dating before we were married, I did something that seemed foolish at first, but it was smart. What I'm talking about was we were early in our dating, and I wanted to impress her. There was an artist that was coming. We lived in Chicago. We were college students in the Chicago area, and there was an artist coming to Chicago. The show was sold out, and we wanted to go see it. It was around Valentine's Day and I thought, I'm going to take her to this show.

Now, I did not have the kind of money that this show required, and it was sold out. So how do you get tickets? Well, one way you can think about it is you can go and try to scalp tickets. But if you don't have a lot of money, that's a challenge. And my cousin happened to manage the venue that they were at. Now, my cousin, just so you get the context, was probably 20 years older than me. I didn't really know him very well, even though he was my cousin. Like he shared my last name. He was my dad's brother's son. But, you know, I'd probably seen him, 20 times in my life, and it was always quick. I was the little kid, and he was the adult kind of a thing.

So, I call and say hey, this is Kurt Bjorklund, your cousin. And by the way, I'm old enough that this was before you texted, so you had to call. So, I called him and said hey, is there any chance I could get tickets to this event? And he said oh, yeah, absolutely. Just, you know, go to this gate, they'll have a guy, and the guy will let you in. Okay? Now, I know I just mentioned you didn't text, right? You didn't have a cell phone. So, I take this girl that I want to impress to this concert where there are no tickets, no chance of getting in, on the word that my cousin, who I don't know very well, says go to this gate, and I have a guy who will let you in.

So, I'm driving up to this concert and I'm thinking, this is stupid, this is foolish. I'm not going to get in. I pull up, go to the gate, and say hey, I'm Kurt Bjorklund. Oh, hey, come on in, and he takes us to this suite with a bunch of other people looking down on this great concert. We had the best seats. And she said yes later. Now, my point is, that sometimes you do something that feels foolish in the moment, but you end up saying no, that was smart. And that, I believe, is what Paul is driving at in Second Corinthians 12. I'm just going to say that there are three foolish smart priorities that he points to here.

Again, the ultimate one is in First Corinthians. Foolish smart to believe in Jesus in the first place. But in Chapter 12 of Second Corinthians, there are three foolish smart priorities. The first one is this. It is foolish smart to prioritize the work of God in your life, verses 11 through 18. The reason I say this is foolish smart is other people will look at anything that you do that is targeted toward the Kingdom of God, toward God's principles, and they'll say what are you doing with your time, your life, your money, your investment, your energy?

And this is Paul's experience. In verse 11, he says, "I have made a fool of myself..." Here's your fool imagery again. "... but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the 'super-apostles,' even though I am nothing." So, he says I know I'm nothing. But what was happening in the church at Corinth is there were these people who had come in who called themselves the Super Apostles or were dubbed that by Paul. We don't really know. But basically, Paul, who had planted the church and taught them the scriptures, was not getting a lot of love from the people because they were saying well, it's nice that you taught us that elementary stuff, but now we're going on to the real stuff and these people are teaching us everything.

Paul's easy response here could have been okay, you just go do church the way you want to do church. But what he does instead is he says, I am going to continue to invest my life in the church with the people at Corinth. My guess is if you've ever endeavored to serve God in any way in your life, you have had a lot of is it worth it moments. Have you ever tried to lead a group of students or kids in kids ministry and you say is anything happening? Is anything getting through? Is it worth it? If you ever led a small group and you said a bunch of people don't seem to care or respond, is it worth it? If you've ever given money and said is it worth it? Does it make a difference? Have you ever invested your time saying I'm going to try to read through the scriptures, study, learn, and pray and said is it worth it? Well, that's the question that you ask all the time if you start to invest your life in something.

Then you see in verse 15 the same thought. He says this. "So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?" Through the context here, what you see is he's saying I will give my life away for you, even

though you seem to be choosing other people, and I don't seem to matter. He says this is foolish because anybody else would look at this and say just walk away.

Now, Jesus says something very similar in Luke chapter 18, verses 29 and 30. Jesus says, "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life." Jesus says there will be days where when you follow me, you may wonder. He doesn't say in this many words, but he says you will receive many times as much. Why does he need to say this? Because it isn't always obvious. At times it feels foolish because we look at things and say it is the temporal stuff that I see that seems to matter most rather than the eternal stuff that I cannot see that seems to matter most.

There was a man named Jim Elliott, who was a missionary to Ecuador, probably 70 years ago now, and he ended up being killed in Ecuador as he tried to tell people about Jesus. But before he traveled to Ecuador, he wrote in his journal the line, "He is no fool who gives the things he cannot keep to gain what he can never lose." A few months later, he was killed. And it seemed to people around him, here's a young man killed in the prime of life, was it worth it? And when his journal was published later by his wife and that phrase became known, people realized that he lived by that mantra.

Now, if you've been around, you've heard me say this before. Church is a bad hobby. Do you know why I say church is a bad hobby? Because if you commit every weekend, Sunday morning, Saturday night to be at church, you go to a group, you serve, you give 10% of your resources, I mean, you don't even get like a pool in the back. And so, in a way, it's a bad hobby because it feels foolish but it isn't foolish if you understand the eternal significance. The call here is to say it's foolish smart when you invest in the work of God.

But here's the second priority, and this is in verses 19 and 20, and that is it is foolish smart to prioritize harmony in relationships. Verse 19, "Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening." And then He says this. "For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be." Translation I'm going to be a little disappointed in you. You're going to be a little disappointed in me. Why? He says, "I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder."

Now, he's talking about the church. He's talking about relationships. And my guess is many of us have relationships that are broken in some spheres of our lives. It might be with family, it might be with neighbors, coworkers, and it could even be in a Christian community in the church. But what he's doing here is he's saying it may seem foolish when you live in some ways, as somebody who says I am going to prioritize unity in relationships.

Here's what these words just mean very quickly. Quarreling means to debate, to fuss about something, to be in constant discord. So, it means this is an argumentative kind of approach to people. Jealousy means that you don't want other people to have things, or you don't like what they have. Outbursts of anger is obvious. It's having rage. Factions mean coalition building. Slander means speaking against others. Gossip is slander, but generally doing it more quietly, whispering. Arrogance means not admitting when we're wrong. Not being

willing to forgive or being a hog for credit. Disorder means having a general feeling of unruliness or disorder in the Christian community.

I think what Paul is doing with this foolishness motif here is he's saying, saying, we're going to be disappointed, and this is what's going on. But I'm going to lean into the relational world with you anyway. Again, what would have been easier is just to say, you guys are a mess. I'm done. I'm out. Forget it. And what we need in many ways to have relational harmony is that we move from what I would say is an us-them mentality, where it's us, the good people, and them the bad people to a we mentality. We move from a win-lose where somebody is a winner, and somebody is a loser in a relationship to a win-win mentality.

But here's the problem with that. Sometimes when you're in a relationship with somebody, they don't play by the same standards that you play by. So sometimes you're going to have to choose to lose in order to have relational harmony. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that you put yourself in a place of abuse. I'm not suggesting that you put yourself in a place where truth isn't spoken because there is a time to say what you're doing is so wrong that I'm going to step away. There is a time to say I'm going to speak the truth even if it ruffles feathers. But what you see here is that he's saying that even though there's all of this relational turmoil, I am going to continue to prioritize relationships. And it seems foolish from the outside, but it's actually to the glory of God.

And it's smart. Here's why it's smart. Do you know what happens relationally when you continue to foster discord and disharmony? It actually hurts you. It's a little bit like this. Have you ever had a cut or a scab on your arm or leg and you've picked at it so that you picked the scab off and then the sore continues because it doesn't heal? Well, what we tend to think is if there's a relational problem and I want to keep it alive, I'm going to pick the scab off the other person's wounds so they still feel it and know that they hurt me. But when you do that, you end up picking your scab off your own arm, and you end up continuing to perpetuate the wound. So, it's foolish maybe in our world's eyes to say build relational harmony, but it's smart in the kingdom of God.

Here's the third priority. This is verse 21. "I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged." And the priority here is to prioritize. It's foolish smart to prioritize purity before God, sexual purity before God.

And this is obvious why this feels foolish in our culture because here's the cultural narrative when it comes to sexuality today. Two people who don't hurt anybody else can do whatever it is that feels good to them. And if it feels good to them, and it doesn't hurt anybody else, then go ahead and do it. That is not God's intention for our sexuality, and God created sexuality.

Now notice that it says grieved over. And the reason that he's afraid is he's going to be humbled because he's going to be so grieved over the way that people are living, that he's going to be humbled, presumably because they'll see his grief. What he's not talking about here is that he's an angry debater about sexual ethics. What he's talking about is saying I so want you to thrive in the ways that God has intended you to thrive, that I'm going to be

grieved when I see that you aren't living this way. That God has a better plan for your sexuality.

Now, these three words that are used here impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery are words that when you read them quickly in an English translation, you can just kind of say, okay, those are just kind of generic words that communicate some things that I kind of know it's something sexual, but that's about it. The word impurity, some versions say uncleanness doesn't just mean that you need to do a better job with personal hygiene. In fact, that's not what it means at all because what it's talking about is a lewdness or a sexual kind of awareness and sense of embracing sexuality that's outside of God's norms for our sexuality.

So, in our day and age, we could talk about the way that we dress, and the things that we think about and pay attention to. We could talk about the things that we watch because sometimes when we watch things, we may say well, that's no big deal, but if it's sexualizing us, that is the idea of this impurity. I know that this is a tricky issue, especially if you're a younger person here and you're still at the age where you're saying I want to be attractive. And attraction is a good thing, God's gift, and noticing things, is a good thing.

But what happens sometimes is it says, well, in order to be attractive, I need to look a little sexy, or I need to notice this. And what we're doing is we're sexualizing ourselves, and in that process, and I don't have the perfect answer for where the line is in this thing or how you understand all of this, but what I'm saying is there should at least be a thought around it here, or we're not addressing sexual purity.

The word sexual sin is the word porneia in the original language. This is the word that means sex outside of the bounds of a covenant relationship. So biblically, God's standard for our sexuality is that a man and woman enter a covenant relationship, and that is where the sex happens. And so, there's a sexualization of us and others without a sex act that is impurity.

Then there's sexual sin, which is a sexual act outside of the bounds of marriage. And then there's debauchery and some translations say sensuality. And this is a word that basically means giving yourself over to sex to be sexualized fully and completely, where you're no longer just doing an act and saying oh, that probably wasn't my best choice. Now you've just gone all the way in and said this is just where I'm at and who I am.

What you see here is a progression. You go from being sexualized to the sex act to complete sensuality, just being given over to it. Again, Paul's idea here is God has a better plan for you, and it's foolish smart, foolish in our culture. But, you know, the truth is, I believe it's actually what our culture wants. And here's why. What does our culture hate rightly? It hates abuse, it hates rape, it hates cheating, and it hates brokenness. What solves that? Do you know what does? God's plan. Now, not entirely. I get it. There can be abuse in a marriage relationship. I'm not saying that's never the case. But if as a culture, the only time that people engaged in sexual acts was when there was a covenant relationship, it would end almost all of those devastating things.

But yet, our culture says well, we want to end those things, but what we want is we still want to be able to kind of be with anybody whenever we want. But the reason I say it's part of what our culture actually wants is here's the other thing that's true. Even in our culture, people

don't write songs generally, there are some, but generally going for the last year I tried 20 different people and now you're the next one. Like that wouldn't sell as a love song because it would be a little like oh, what is that? And yet sometimes that's what feels right.

There's a man who wrote a book a while back called *Sacred Fire* and his name was Ronald Rolheiser. Here's what he wrote. He said, "Sex cannot deliver the goods. It alleviates our loneliness far too little, especially our moral loneliness. Sex that isn't sublime doesn't bring us a soulmate. What it brings is a fix, a hit. It brings basically momentary help that gets us through a lonely night or a lonely season, but deep down, we know that it cannot give us what we need. And sex cannot be sublime without first living with a real chastity. A person who sleeps with someone, be that they hardly know, has no real commitment to, has never lived in chaste tension, and will not have a sublime or profound experience. Short-circuiting chastity is a little like trying to write a masterpiece overnight. Good luck, but it isn't going to happen. Great love, like great art, takes time and great effort, sustained commitment, and lots of time."

I think he states that fairly well. Now, obviously, if you're here and you say hey, I've already stepped past this, God can do amazing things in restoring and bringing beauty. And I want you to hear this. And that is sometimes when churches talk about this, and this was in this text, it's not like I said, hey, it's the end of January time for this talk, sometimes people get the idea that the church's message about sexuality is just don't. Just say no. But you realize sex is God's idea. He created it. It is a good gift to humanity to be celebrated in the right bounds. But as the creator who gave it to us, he also says here's where it's going to be best. Here's where you will thrive.

The reason Paul grieved was because when he went and knew what was going on in the church in Corinth, he was saying, I'm grieved because you're just living the cultural way. And it may seem foolish in that culture, but it's actually smart to prioritize sexual purity, to prioritize God's way. And the same message holds today. So, it's foolish smart to believe in the power of the cross. Ultimately, it's foolish smart to prioritize the work of God. It's foolish smart to prioritize relational harmony and unity, and it's foolish smart to prioritize sexual purity.

I don't know where you are here today, but my guess is almost all of us have at least one of those areas today where we have been tempted to say, that's just foolish. That doesn't make sense. That's not worth my investment. And I just want to encourage you, wherever you are today, to say, God, this may seem foolish even to me right now, but because you're God and the Creator of the universe who knows all things, made me, and is for my good, I'm going to trust you with my life, even where it seems foolish. He is no fool who gives the things he cannot keep to gain what he can never lose.

Let's pray. God, I ask today that you would help us to see not what feels foolish, but actually where real wisdom is, and commit our lives to the eternal, not the temporal. And God, for those who are maybe here saying I'm not even sure about Jesus at all, that even this idea that the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it's the power of God to those who are being saved, that there would be even just a recognition right now that even to take a step towards you might feel foolish, but it is the wisest, most smart thing that we could do, to say it's not about my effort, but it's about what Jesus has done. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.