

Come Be a Fool as Well – 1 Corinthians 4:8-21

Introduction – As Paul concludes his exhortation (1:10 – 4:21) to the Corinthians to stop their fascination with wisdom that boasts in men over against Paul and his gospel, his tone takes on serious sarcasm, biting but tough love, and the admonition of a loving father. Among the respectable elites in Corinth, the sophists of their day, Paul, his teachings and lifestyle, were evidence of his foolishness, and to be associated with him was scandalous. Paul’s reply? “*Come be a fool as well.*”

Apostolic Foolishness (vv8-13) – There is a time for a serrated edge, a biting irony and sarcasm, and Paul shows us when. In v8 he may be playing with claims of “full,” “rich,” and “reigning as kings” that ancient sources indicate were made by Cynic and Stoic philosophers. On the other hand, in God’s providence, the apostles to this group look as though they are last, condemned to death, and made a spectacle of ridicule to heaven and earth (v9). In other words, the Corinthians think they have arrived and done so by abandoning the very one who founded their church. For the Corinthians to become respectable in the world’s eyes, Paul and his teachings must be declared to be “foolish, weak, and dishonorable” (v10). Paul says that in contrast, the Corinthians are “wise,” “strong,” and “honored,” and there should be “scare” quotes around those words. The following chapters of rebuke and correction will make this clear.

To be a spectacle meant that Paul and the apostles were like captured enemy soldiers condemned to death and paraded at the end of a victory procession (v9). It was obvious that those who were following the way of Christ are the losers, for they hunger and thirst, they are homeless, they had to work with their hands at menial labor (vv11-12). But wasn’t this the way of the crucified Savior (Isaiah 53:3)? It is as if Paul is saying, if you really want to belong to Christ, look at me – this is where it leads, “*we have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things...*” (v13).

The Compromising Sin of Worldly Respectability – In a so-called sophisticated culture, it just isn’t going to be cool to be a follower of Christ. Consider the many cultural issues that we face where we are called fools and “*the filth of the world.*” Abortion is not a choice, it is murder. The imago dei is “male and female” and those genders are not accidents. Marriage is an institution defined by God’s Word alone. Sexual fidelity is defined by God’s Word alone as well. Secular humanism and Darwinist evolution are not just wrong; they are wicked. Socialism is theft based on envy. Little children are to obey their parents and be disciplined by spanking. Wives are to submit to their husbands. Christian education is not an option; it is commanded. Young men are to grow up, marry, and raise a family – and take glad, sacrificial responsibility for the well-being of them all. – “*the scum of all things...*” That is what the world thinks. But how tempted is the church to think the same? The danger is creeping respectability; it is the way of all flesh.

The Call to Imitate (vv14-21) – Paul says he writes like this because he loves them as a father loves and warns his straying child (v14). And this father, under various unjustified charges of disgrace, is calling his children to follow him in godly disrespectability. The Corinthians may have 10,000 instructors (pedagogues), but Paul was their father who begat them through the gospel (v15). Pedagogues care for children but fathers are willing to suffer and take full responsibility. Side note: clergy were never referred to as “Father” until the Middle Ages. In dismissing this practice (rightly), we can fall into the other ditch of individualism and egalitarianism, dismissing the honor due to those who have human authority over us.

And so, Paul calls them to imitate him (v16), and is sending Timothy, his “son,” to teach them how to imitate Paul “*of my ways in Christ*” (v17). Paul was not afraid to confront arrogance, nor afraid to confront it head-on if the Lord willed (vv18-19). He was like Jesus, who would confront Peter when he spoke for Satan, or James and John when they wanted to call down judgment fire upon a town. Paul’s confidence was not in his words, but in the power of the Gospel (vv20-21, 2:4-5) which could come as a rod or in love and a spirit of gentleness. A preacher should be less interested in sounding like the next respectable and interesting Ted Talk and more like Jonathan Edwards when the Spirit comes in power.

Come Be a Fool as Well – It’s Father’s Day and so here is an application for fathers. You need to call your children to imitate you in a lifestyle of godly disrepute in the eyes of the world. You need to take their mother physically and metaphorically in your arms and give her your life, give her children, and give the wisdom of the cross to those children. You are a father and so you have wisdom to give your children (Prov 1:7-9, 2:1-5, 3:1-2, 4:1-4, 20-22, etc...). If you do not have wisdom, then go get it so you have it to give (Prov 4:7). There is nothing more destructive to a child than a father who is a fool, seeking respectability, the approval of the world, and the ways of his flesh. And there is hardly a better gift in this world than to be a wise, godly father worth imitating, both to the children born by your wife, and the spiritual children you may be blessed to beget through the gospel. Our world, this culture, needs fathers. And we need cultural/spiritual fathers who stand courageously against the enemies of the gospel for the sake of this generation and generations to come.

These are the fathers who, *“being reviled, we bless, being persecuted, we endure, being defamed, we entreat”* (v12-13). And these are the fathers who will be called fools. And the world will be won.

Dave Hatcher – June 17, 2018

Notes for Little Saints

It’s Father’s Day. What are you doing to honor your father today?

One thing godly Dads want is for their sons and daughters to imitate them as in the things of Christ.

Write out 1 Corinthians 4:16

Paul wants them to imitate him, and as it says in v17, he wants them to imitate him in “my ways in Christ.”

What ways do you see your father following Christ that you would imitate?

What ways do you see other older Christians, spiritual fathers to you in a sense, following Christ that you would imitate?

What does Scripture tell you to do with the wisdom of your father and mother (Proverbs 1:8-9, also 2:1-5) – write out answers in your own words.