

ALWAYS THE FOOL

1 Corinthians 15:12-14

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FOOL FOR GRACE

Pastor Chuck Mallory had taken to spending more time with Tony Stapleton. Mostly it was just sitting in rocking chairs on Tony's front porch and talking. Chuck used these moments to get a temperature on how Tony was doing now that he had realigned his values and pushed his fishing trips to the back burner to take better care of JulieAnne.

But today was a little different. Today, he invited Tony for a ride-along as the pastor did his morning rounds. Chuck liked to take a couple of hours and drive through the town to check and see if anyone had needs that he was unaware of and try to meet those needs. Tony felt that such drives were most likely time wasters and that the pastor was probably just doing it for his own edification. But he agreed to come along.

Chuck drove an old Chevy pickup and parked in Tony's driveway just long enough for Tony to hop in and fasten his seat belt. It was a beautiful Spring day, so they drove with the windows down. Tony found the pastor easy to talk with and he always provided him with insights that Tony hadn't considered.

"How's JulieAnne doing?" inquired Chuck.

"Well, pastor, it's like she's a brand new woman now that I'm not fishing all the time!" said Tony.

“I was praying that would be the case,” replied Chuck. “And it is so nice having you both back in Sunday services. I see that Jim has added you back into the Elder rotation. How’s that working out?”

“I hadn’t realized how just much I missed it until Jim put me back in the rotation. It’s good to be serving again.”

Chuck pulled his truck into the parking lot at Big Sam’s Market. He didn’t intend on stopping, but he liked to drive by. The market seemed to be a magnet for people passing through who were down on their luck. And sure enough, a young man was sitting on the sidewalk next to the ice machines, eyes closed and back against the wall, a floppy hat shading his face. Chuck pulled into a space near where the gentleman was sitting.

“I’ll be back in a minute, Tony. You can wait in the truck if you like.”

Chuck walked over to the young man and started a conversation with him. Like most of the people who he found at the market, the man was down on his luck and just passing through. He needed to get to Ruskville because his mother was sick and in the hospital. That was the most common of the stories that the pastor heard from these individuals. He knew that it probably wasn’t true, but the man obviously needed help, for whatever reason.

“Hop in, young man, and I will give you a ride over to the Quickstop where I can get you a ticket on the next bus to Ruskville,” said Chuck.

The man grabbed a cloth bag that contained his worldly possessions and took his time getting in the truck. It was obvious it had been several days since

he had bathed. Chuck decided he would pay Trent at the Quickstop for time in one of the shower stalls for the man. After all, he would feel bad letting the man on the bus with other passengers without trying to let him get cleaned up.

Chuck pulled into the station where he spotted Trent working on Cora Lee's Civic. "Hey Trent. You got a minute? I could use your help," said the pastor.

Trent dropped the wrench he was holding and loped over to the truck. "Yes sir, pastor Chuck. How can I help?"

"This young man could use a little help," said the pastor, pointing to the man in the back seat. "When's the next bus to Rusksville?"

"Bout an hour, pastor," replied Trent.

"That's just about perfect. I would appreciate it if you let him use one of your shower stalls to get cleaned up and then get him a ticket on that bus," said the pastor pulling out his wallet. "And feed him, if you would. Here's forty dollars. That should more than cover it and your time and cost. But if it is short, just let me know and I will get it back to you."

"I know you will, pastor. I'll look after him. Come on, ... what's his name?"

"What's your name son?" asked Chuck.

"Jack," said the man.

"Well then, come on, Jack. Let's get you taken care of," said Trent.

Jack grabbed his bag and exited the truck with nary a word. Trent took him in tow up to the station. “Talk to you later, pastor,” Trent shouted as they entered the small store.

“Now pastor, that was just foolish,” admonished Tony. “That young man wasn’t grateful for what you just did. You should know better than to do that. He’s just using you.”

Pastor Chuck didn’t say a word, but just drove to the next stop, the local health clinic. This time, Tony accompanied the pastor as they entered the small building. The clinic wasn’t much, but it met the needs of the locals who needed health care and had nowhere else to go. Doc Adams and Dr. Danners would switch off and keep the clinic covered for at least half days during the week. Today was Doc Adams’ turn. Chuck could hear him busy in the back taking care of an unseen someone, but then the Doc stuck his head out to see who had come through the door.

“Oh, Pastor Chuck, it’s you. Whatcha need?”

“I’m just checking in on you, Doc. I wanted to make sure everything is okay,” said the pastor.

“I’m just stitching up Anabell Carlisle, you know, Fleabite’s daughter. She cut her arm on a chain link fence. Pretty nasty cut, but she’ll be okay,” said Doc Adams.

“We all know that Frank can’t afford that, Doc. Just send the bill over to the church and we’ll get it taken care of. And no cutting back on that bill, Doc. You

need to be paid properly. What you do here is important and we want to make sure that you and Dr. Danners are able to keep this place open and available.”

“You know me too well, pastor. All right then. I’ll send the bill over to Danielle at the church. Now, y’all get on out of here so I can get back to work.”

“ We’ll catch you later, Doc. We didn’t mean to keep you from what you were doing,” said Chuck as they left.

After they got in the truck, Tony turned to the pastor and said, “Preacher, you can’t go around paying other people’s bills like that. The church will go broke.”

Chuck just smiled and drove over to Main Street. A woman was sitting on an old folding chair at the corner of Fourth and Main with a sign that read, ‘Will work for food.’ Chuck had seen her around before, but she wasn’t one of Parable’s residents. He pulled the truck up to her and she held out an empty can that used to hold peaches. She couldn’t bring herself to meet the pastor’s eyes.

“What’s your name?” the pastor asked as he dropped a ten in the can.

“Martha,” she said through parched lips. “I don’t usually do this, but I really need something to eat.”

Pastor Chuck stuck out his arm and lifted her chin so that she could see him. “Listen, Martha, this is what I want you to do. If you will go across the street there to Daisy’s Diner and order whatever you want to eat, I will pay for it. Just tell Daisy that pastor Chuck sent you. The sheriff’s deputy should be there

because it is almost lunch time. Tell him that Pastor Church would like for him to give you a ride out to the Bent Tree Motel. I will call ahead and Jackson will have a room for you for tonight. Did you get all that Martha?”

Martha nodded her head and hurried across the street to the diner.

“Pastor Chuck, you’re the one born every minute,” said Tony

“One what, Tony?”

“A sucker, preacher. A Sucker. You just helped three people and not one of them is going to say thank you or pay you back. Don’t you see how messed up that is? They all got something they needed, and you got nothing in return. I really thought you were wiser than that, preacher.”

“Hmmm,” said Chuck. “Imagine that. You thought they were all taking advantage of me in some way. But there’s a problem with that, Tony. Do you see what the problem is?”

“No preacher, all I see is an old fool,” said Tony.

“The problem, Tony, is this. You saw these moments through the eyes of the people I helped and assumed that they were taking advantage of me. That is the way most people see the world. But if you had taken the time to see these people through my eyes, you would have seen that God granted me the opportunity to help them, just as Jesus would have helped them; to see them the way Jesus sees them. These were not moments that God gave me to judge them, but moments for me to grow and be more like Jesus.”

“I never thought of it that way, pastor. I’m sorry I called you a fool,” said Tony sheepishly.

“It’s okay, Tony. You can call me a fool for Jesus anytime,” Chuck said as he turned the truck back towards Tony’s place. He chuckled as he thought about how even old fools like Tony and himself could still learn a few things.

12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

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As modern Christians, we tend to draw black and white lines regarding the various divisions in the Jewish faith at the time of Jesus, and into the 2nd and 3rd centuries as well. Most of us can recall the Pharisees and the Sadducees because they are both mentioned often in the New Testament. History teaches us that the Sadducees were more lofty in their thoughts and often in a higher economic bracket than most Jews. They embraced a more ritualistic approach in their worship and did not believe in the concept of resurrection. They did not believe in the immortality of the soul. On the other hand, the Pharisees were more middle class in nature and embraced a theology that recognized the concept of resurrection and the possibility of an immortal soul. These two divisions of Judaism often fought with each other without ever making any progress toward a unified theology.

We don't talk much about the Essenes, the Zealots, or the revolutionaries, but we can't help but note that the disciple Simon (not Peter) came to Jesus with a Zealot background. In the beginning, Christianity, known as The Way, was considered a Jewish sect. The vast majority of Jews were just plain Jews, not really associated with any sect at all, but often embracing whatever was being taught by their local rabbis, very much like our denominations and independent

churches today. Why is it that we have such a difficult time letting Christians be Christians without trying to force feed them onto a denomination path? In the chaos of the 1st century, many common Jews embraced the ideas for more than one sect. An everyday kind of Jew might also embrace some of the theology of the Sadducees, and possibly be part Zealot as well. Or they could just be non-associated Jews, not drawn to any one flame.

Paul is pretty good about pushing people to examine what they believe and why they believe it. It was especially important in his day as the theology of The Way was being brewed in a hostile environment of Jewish traditionalism. As Paul does his missionary work and raises up new churches, he often finds himself having to battle theological boundaries that don't mesh with basic Christian theology.

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Sometimes, the only way to get people to examine their faith is by logically explaining things and encouraging self-reflection. Paul is writing a letter to the church at Corinth, which seems to be struggling with the idea of resurrection. They are being taught that resurrection is not a viable doctrine for the church. And so, Paul tells them that if there is no resurrection, then Christ could not have been resurrected. If that is true and Christ did not rise from the dead, then

everything they believed about Christ was false and they are just a bunch of fools for believing differently.

There's that word. Fools. Are we making fools out of ourselves over the things we believe because they have no logical foundation? Are we making fools out of ourselves for believing in a virgin birth? How about believing that Jesus is God's son and died for our sins? For believing in the many miracles that he performed while he was on earth? Are we fools for believing that he died on a Roman Cross and then rose from the dead three days later when there are so many people calling us fanatics given to foolish myths? After all, wouldn't this whole God and Jesus thing be easier to swallow if we just got rid of the resurrection story? Why can't we just treat Jesus like a wise human being and drop all the spiritual enlightenment whatnot? Why does the world insist that we pick the right pill to swallow in order to avoid being ostracized and possibly hospitalized for our beliefs?

And on top of all that, the world tells us that if we are going to call ourselves Christians, then we should act like Christians. If we are people of The Way, then we should behave like people of The Way. If we are wanting people to see us as followers of Christ, then maybe our lives should be a reflection of Christ himself. If Jesus loved without discrimination, included others rather than building fences, served without condescension, and put grace before contempt, maybe we should be doing the same. Is the world so wrong to expect this from us? Is it wrong for Jesus to expect this from us?

Never forget that at one moment in time, the world was praising Jesus and

the next moment they were nailing him to the cross. People called him a fool for not knowing when to quit. They called him a fool for not behaving the way that they thought he should behave. They thought him the fool because he refused to save himself. They believed him to be a fool because they could not see the world through his eyes of compassion and grace. Even his disciples deserted him, fearing for their own lives.

There are two kinds of fools in this world. The first kind of fool are those who define themselves by making fooling choices. These people often find themselves shunned and ignored because nobody wants to be associated with a fool. The second are considered fools because what they are saying and doing is not understood by the people around them. It is difficult to fit their ideas and theories into our predisposed boundaries of normal behavior. These people are visionaries, leaders, explorers, and rabble rousers who believe change is not only possible, but inevitable. They do not let the pressures and opinions of the world prevent them from expressing their views, no matter how ridiculous the community at large sees them. We find that type of person in Pastor Chuck today, who doesn't even try to explain or fit into the world as Tony sees it.

But I want to take you back to Paul and his letters to the church at Corinth. In Chapter 4, verses 1-13, he steps right into the heart of this message. I will leave you with this passage of scripture today with the encouragement that you explore the deep nature of what he is trying to explain to us. If you have ears, hear what he is teaching us.

1 This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

3 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself.

4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

6 Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.

7 For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

8 Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you!

9 For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.

10 We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored!

11 To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.

12 We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it;

13 when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

God bless you all!

AMEN

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