

+ Judges 10:6-16 + Victory Is Ours Through God's Foolishness + 4th Sunday in Lent + 15 March 2015 +

"Do you realize how foolish you look?" None of us likes to look foolish or sound foolish or be considered foolish. Now it's one thing to be intentionally silly, but another to unintentionally prove to be a fool—someone who doesn't know better, someone who lacks common sense. For that reason, we usually try to do everything in our power to avoid being made fools.

There's even an old proverb about that. "Fool me once shame on you. Fool me twice shame on me." If I get fooled once, you've made me look foolish. If you fool me again, I've made myself look foolish. If I'm fooled for a second time, then that makes me the real fool. Hopefully, I would realize the foolishness of it all and not fall into that trap again. Common sense tells us that if someone makes us look foolish once, we'll probably try to avoid that same situation or response if that person tries it again.

...But what happens if you get fooled again and again and again and again? There's no proverb out there for that. If I keep allowing myself to be fooled by the same person or the same thing multiple times, then I'm an extraordinary fool. I lack common sense and I don't learn from my mistakes.

It's a pretty harsh analysis, but don't we see that happen so often around us or even in our own lives? Maybe you or someone you know keeps making the same mistakes again and again with relationships or jobs or the people they call friends or with money. Maybe they're being naïve or people easily take advantage of them. Maybe it's a blind spot or an area of weakness that you have. Either way, those decisions make a person look pretty foolish.

Today we hear about someone who loved his children very, very much. His love for them could truly be described as unconditional—no string attached. Unconditionally, he provided everything they needed and so much that they wanted. As a loving father, he made sure to put them in a position to prosper in whatever they did. He protected them from danger even stepping between them and anyone who attacked them. Above all, he cared most about their souls because he wanted them to go to heaven someday.

He loved them so very dearly and gave them so much, but they had a problem—a big problem. They liked to run away from home. They yearned to go to places that their father had warned them about—dangerous, seductive places that could ruin them financially, physically, spiritually. What was even worse was that no matter how much their father loved them and took care of them, they kept convincing themselves that they knew better and that their lives would be so much better when they got away from the restrictive grasp of dear, old dad. So they would run from the loving arms of their father and into the arms of those who only wanted to use them and ruin them, hurt them and take advantage of them.

When the father would find out, he wouldn't turn a blind eye, but out of love for them and for their eternal souls, he disciplined them. His discipline was painful, even harsh at times. It certainly was restrictive and they lost a lot of their favorite things for a time. Their father wouldn't defend them after they had made fools of themselves. He would withhold some of his generosity, but he still loved them. So when they turned from their wicked behavior, he showed them mercy. He helped them. He protected them, even sending friends to help them in their time of greatest need. He generously provided for them and above all, he kept on loving them in spite of their faithlessness.

...But those children never learned. They kept turning their backs on their father and running away from him to those who would harm them and to places that could destroy them. The father would discipline them and they would turn back again for a time, but as time went on, the spiral only got worse. Still the father kept unconditionally loving and saving his children.

By all accounts, that father's behavior was pretty foolish. How could he still love those unfaithful, unloving, ungrateful children with such faithful, unconditional love? You'd think at some point he'd come to his senses, after being treated so faithlessly over and over and over again. That's what you and I would do, but he's not you and me. He's God—the Lord of free, full, and faithful grace, which makes the account before us so heartbreaking, yet also so comforting for us.

By the time you get to our text, the spiral of destruction is near its end—and things are really bad among the Israelites, God's Old Testament people. The inspired writer tells us, "***Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD.***" The Israelites had often abandoned the Lord of grace before by chasing after the fertility gods of the peoples around them.

This time, however, they chased after the false gods of seven different nations—practically from everywhere! ***“They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths, and the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the Ammonites and the gods of the Philistines...They forsook the LORD and no longer served him...”*** These were all nations whom the Lord had defeated on Israel’s behalf in the past, which only made matters worse as the Israelites held nothing back.

Rightfully, God became very angry with his people and disciplined them. In the past, he had sent one nation to “discipline” the Israelites, but this time, God sent two attacking nations, ***“who shattered and crushed them.”*** The Lord allowed these attacking nations to crush the Israelites together for 18 years. Naturally, the people cried out to the Lord for help.

Now the Lord in his mercy had delivered them from their enemies so many times before that they thought of him like some vending machine in the sky that only required a token of repentance to spit out some deliverance. However, their loving and holy Lord had a surprising response this time around. ***“When the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Sidonians, the Amalekites and the Maonites oppressed you and you cried out to me for help, did I not save you from their hands? But you have forsaken me and served other gods, so I will no longer save you. Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble!”*** Had God finally had enough? Was God finally going to put an end to his foolish love for these faithless people?

It certainly seemed that way. It certainly seemed like God was finally going to abandon his people to their false, defeated gods of wood and stone, but the Lord in his love accomplished great things through his Word! His sharp, killing message cut through the calloused hearts of this desperate people.

With repentant hearts, they confessed their sins before the Lord and called on his mercy once more. ***“We have sinned. Do with us whatever you think best, but please rescue us now.”*** This wasn’t just a confession of words, but also of deeds. ***“Then they got rid of the foreign gods among them and served the LORD.”*** For a moment, the children realized how faithful their Father had been and they went back home to him. As for the Father? ***“He could bear Israel’s misery no longer”*** and rescued them.

Foolishness! Utter foolishness by human standards, but perfect wisdom by God’s standards. God in his faithful, unconditional, self-sacrificing love relented not because of their confession of sin or their repentant return, but because of his “foolish” love that would not give up. That love welcomes prodigals home. That love forgives the proud. That love embraces the repeat offenders, and ultimately defies all human wisdom and fear of foolishness.

That love comes not from a sinful, human heart like ours, but it’s love that we all desperately need. When was the last time that you made God and his love look foolish? Was it a sin of weakness that you keep falling into again and again and again, showing how faithless you really are by nature? Was it guilt from turning your back on God and chasing after some other false, defeated god of this world? Was it that time when you willingly put yourself in a position to be tempted or seduced by someone or something or by Satan himself? Was it a time when you thought that you knew better than God and ended up falling flat on your face, still feeling the shameful wounds today? The truth is, every one of us has made the Lord of grace and his unconditional love look pretty foolish, and we continue to do so.

Recalling those times when we have made God look foolish, what can we do? You can confess your sins before the Lord, but do you expect him to just dispense forgiveness and rescue like some vending machine in the sky? You and I deserve to hear that harsh disciplinary message from our holy God just like those Israelites back in the days of the judges. “When things were going rough for you, when you were under attack spiritually, did I not rescue you? Yet you still go chasing after the lies, the seductions, the destructive things of this world. Let your friends, your activities, your computer, your sports, your stuff, your family deliver you this time. ***I will no longer save you.”***

That’s what you and I should expect to hear from our God, yet the Lord of grace looks at us and relents. Well, he looks at us through Jesus and does not forsake us as our sins deserve. You see, Jesus was the embodiment of God’s mercy and love. Jesus was faithful 100% because you’ve lived a life of faithlessness. Then when the time came, Jesus went to the cross where the holy God turned his back on a Savior covered with every last filthy sin that you’ve committed. God turned his back on Jesus so he could turn his foolish, fatherly love towards you to bring you back to his loving embrace.

Utter foolishness, isn't it? Why would a holy, all-knowing God be so quick to rescue you and me when we don't deserve anything, but condemnation? God's wisdom isn't like our wisdom that only forgives so much. Instead God's wisdom uses the foolishness of Christ on the cross to rescue our eternal souls. God's love isn't like our love that attaches conditions to prove our love is real. Instead God's love unconditionally sacrifices himself to make us his own. God's mercy isn't like our mercy that gives up when we prove too faithless. Instead God's mercy keeps pursuing us to the end.

In the end, God isn't so foolish after all. That "foolish" love in Christ sought us out, rescued us, restored us, and will bring us to heaven someday. So leave all your faithlessness at the foot of the cross with Jesus because you know that through God's foolish love in Christ, victory is ours. Amen.