

# Fools for Christ

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

I hope this sermon makes you a little bit uncomfortable. Discomfort is a strong motivator, or rather, a strong demotivator. It holds us back from doing some of the things that we ought to do. So let's dive right into some of this discomfort and what we can do about it.

We start with the story of King David and the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was a box that contained the original Ten Commandments, and it was central to the Israelite religion. David decided to bring it from where it had been stored into his capital city, Jerusalem. Along the way a man was killed by the power of the Ark and David became afraid to carry it any further. He left it for a time in the house of Obed-Edom. But when David saw that the presence of the Ark brought blessings to the household, he decided once again to bring it into Jerusalem. This is where we pick up the story.

So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with gladness. And so it was, when those bearing the ark of Jehovah had gone six paces, that he sacrificed oxen and fatted sheep. Then David danced before Jehovah with all his might; and David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of Jehovah with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet. Now as the ark of Jehovah came into the City of David, Michal, Saul's daughter, looked through a window and saw King David leaping and whirling before Jehovah; and she despised him in her heart. (2 Samuel 6:9-16)

Although David was afraid of the power of the Ark, when he saw the blessings that came with it his fears were allayed and he rejoiced to bring it to Jerusalem. Some might even say he went overboard: he made copious animal sacrifices along the way, he leapt and danced and whirled, and everyone played music and shouted as they ushered the Ark into the city. Later we find out that David danced so exuberantly that his robes lifted up and he exposed himself.

On the one hand we have here a delightfully innocent expression of joy in the Lord and His teachings. David is acting like a child, with no care or concern even over his own nakedness. In the Word, this kind of careless regard for nakedness is a sign of pure innocence: think of Adam and Eve, as yet untouched by evil and sin, or even a young child racing through the house without a stitch of clothing on, totally unconcerned (*Secrets of Heaven* §163).

On the other hand, not everyone was amused with David's antics. His wife, Michal (who happened to also be King Saul's daughter) was watching from a window. Suffice it to say, she was not impressed. In fact, she "despised [David] in her heart" when she saw the way he was carrying on (2 Samuel 6:16). When he got home she let him have it directly:

How glorious was the king of Israel today, uncovering himself today in the eyes of the maids of his servants, as one of the base fellows shamelessly uncovers himself! (2 Samuel 6:20)

Instead of David's innocent uncaring at his own nakedness, Michal is ashamed and embarrassed. In the Word this reaction to nakedness is a sign that evil and

selfishness have crept in and a person is no longer innocent (*Secrets of Heaven* §213). We can all relate to Michal's embarrassment (although some of us are more susceptible than others): someone starts to make a fool of themselves out in public and we get mad and frantically try to get them to stop, lest any attention is drawn to us too.

The story of David and Michal is not about just any kind of embarrassment though: it is about spiritual embarrassment and the contrast between innocently delighting in the Lord and self-consciously holding back lest we be judged by the world. The wisdom of God seems like foolishness to the world, and so following God's wisdom inevitably leads to us feeling foolish and even embarrassed. The Apostle Paul draws out this paradox in 1 Corinthians:

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. (1 Corinthians 3:18-19)

Many things that the world deems to be wise are spiritually foolish, and many things that the world deems to be foolish are in fact true spiritual wisdom.

I experienced one small example of this a while back. I was listening to a sermon by a friend on some hot-button issues. As he preached he became more engaged and his emotions rose to a crescendo to match his words. And to be clear, his words were powerful and were well-served by the emotion behind them. But my instant reaction was to cringe; to look away; to pull back; in my world, showing strong emotion publicly is embarrassing. And it's even embarrassing to see someone else doing it. *Even though* it was exactly the right thing for him to be doing, spiritually. That's the key: I was embarrassed by someone doing the right thing because of how I have been conditioned by the world and what it judges to be right or wrong, wise or foolish, worthy or unworthy.

The Teachings of the New Church explain that it is the earthly rational part of our minds that reacts this way to spiritual things. This is the part of our mind that on the one hand can sit on high and observe lower things and pass judgment; and that on the other hand is not tempered by true spiritual love and wisdom. Michal, looking down on David from on high with scorn represents this part of our minds. The Teachings of the New Church even say that this part of our mind, in its infinite "wisdom," mocks and despises spiritual truths, on the basis of what makes sense from a worldly point of view (*Secrets of Heaven* §1911, 2196, 2654). I'll give a brief taste of what these ideas are here:

This rational would again mock if it were told that in heaven the greatest are those who are least; that the wisest are those who believe and perceive that they themselves are the least wise; that the happiest are those who wish the greatest happiness to others and the least to themselves; that heaven consists in wishing to be below everyone else, but hell in wishing to be above everyone else; and that consequently the glory of heaven does not hold within it anything at all of that which the glory of the world holds. (*Secrets of Heaven* §2654)

Now in the context of church these statements are well-accepted truisms. But in the wider world they can be seen as foolish: the greatest are those who are least? If you want power, you need to rise to a position of authority! The wisest are those who

believe they are least wise? If you want to be wise, you need to show off your education! The happiest are those try to make other people happy? You need to prioritize your own happiness and let other people figure it out on their own, you can't make other people happy! Heaven is all about putting other people first? You need to love yourself first!

These are not mere intellectual disagreements. Peer pressure directly effects our choices. And it's not just other people: I know for myself I have internalized some of the things that the world sees as foolish, and resist myself acting on them.

When someone makes a sexist or racist comment, do you speak up or do you keep quiet? It's surprisingly hard to rock the boat even that gently. Will they take it the right way? Will they respond with judgment or anger? Will they mock you for being too pc?

Or it might feel oddly embarrassing to ask someone if they are alright. This one is weird because we all know we should be looking out for each other. Yet it is hard to push through the superficial and confront the unknown reality of how someone is doing, and genuinely care about the answer.

Or it might feel childish to decide that you don't want to be around a certain friend group because of their morals, or to avoid a certain get-together because of the language and content that is consumed.

All these examples are mirrored in Michal: from on high, rationally observing delight in embracing the Lord's law and deciding that logical, rational, dignified self-interest is more important.

The price we pay for this attitude is that we can never fully live what the Lord teaches. All our efforts will be diminished and half-hearted. David pushed back and insisted on his whole-hearted approach. In response to Michal's criticism, he said,

It was before Jehovah, who chose me instead of your father and all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of Jehovah, over Israel. Therefore I will play music before Jehovah. And I will be even more undignified than this, and will be humble in my own sight. But as for the maidservants of whom you have spoken, by them I will be held in honour. (2 Samuel 6:21-22)

David was willing to sacrifice all of his worldly dignity in order to humbly follow the Lord. He would make himself *even more* undignified in following the Lord. In this commitment there is real spiritual freedom. I know that if I stopped caring what anyone else thought of me, I would be living a different life. That's hard to admit. Most of us like to think we are immune to peer pressure. But think about it, think of things that you are unwilling to do or say because they are so cringey. Or notice the ways that you judge other people who are just a little too committed to their faith. Notice how that aloof, rational, part of your mind rejects that attitude.

There is a beautiful paradox in losing ourselves in following the Lord. The more we let go of concern about how we are seen, the more we abandon our grip on social standing, the more give up our own self-image, the more we gain a true, strong, independent character in the Lord. When we choose to become foolish to the world, we become wise in the Lord.

*Amen.*

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where in your life does embarrassment stand in the way of doing what is right?
2. How would this coming week be different if you had no fear of what other people thought of your choices and you fully trusted in the Lord?
3. Who are the people that can see you fully, with no shame or embarrassment?