

“Making the Most of Your Time”

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“Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” That was what was stated in that Scripture, but as I said in the prayer, it is kind of hard sometimes to figure out what it means to be true to God and how to be faithful, and not foolish. Sometimes it is hard to figure out the difference and yet, as I’m looking at the stories that have been in the news over a period of time, sometimes it is pretty obvious, and I wonder how in the world can people be so foolish in the decisions that they make; the actions they decide to undertake. And, often, foolishness and sin end up going hand in hand.

Let me give you a few examples: I got a real kick out of a group of criminals in Derbyshire, England. It was in 2011 and the police had a real problem because, all of a sudden, in 2011, in that part of England, they had a problem. They had a whole ton of fugitives; either they broke out of prison, or they didn’t show up for their trial - and were on the lamb - but they [the policemen] couldn’t figure out how to get them back.

So, one of the policemen had a “ah-ah” moment and decided they would organize a sting operation. The other policemen said, “No. No nobody is that dumb.” But what they decided to do was, list all of these guys and a few other police officers’ family members in the paper and say, “These are the winners of the lottery of the so and so beer company and these individuals have won a free crate of beer. All you have to do is come to the company on the such and such day, and at such and such time, to claim your winnings, you lucky people.” On that day, the police were hanging in the next room. They came out when everybody had gathered together to collect their crates. Nineteen fugitives were caught on that day, at that moment.

Now, Good Lord, what kind of thinking is that?

But it kind of gets worse, because in 2008, in Chicago, where I went to seminary - I always watch for Chicago things - there was this gentleman named Ruben Zarate. He needed money. He was 18 years old and all 18-year-olds need money. So he cooked up a plan - thought through it very well. He knew how he was going to make a quick buck. He found a gun that he could take, and he got that handgun, and robbed a muffler shop right outside of downtown Chicago.

He walked in, pointed the gun at the employee, and the employee said, “Oh, I’m so sorry, but the safe is locked. They don’t give me the combination, I’m just the employee. The manager has the combination.”

“Well,” Ruben said, “get the manager.”

“Well the manager is out to lunch. He won’t be back for a while. I don’t know when he will be back.”

So Ruben thought about this, as only an 18-year-old with a gun can think about things, and he said, “Alright. I really don’t want to be hanging around here, in case the police come in,

but I just don't want to keep coming back, either." So he wrote down his name and cell phone number [laughter] and handed it to the employee and said, "Could you call me when he gets back - then I will come back?" [Laughter.]

So he leaves and the employee – of course – calls the manager, and the manager does his thing, and about one and half hours later, he [the manager] calls Ruben. Ruben comes back to get into the safe. As he is about to collect his earnings, he collects handcuffs from the Chicago PD.

You know foolishness and sin kind of go hand in hand.

But, my favorite one was what I looked up in Columbia, South America. These three gang members were sure they could make a killing. So, they got together and planned it out. Now wisdom is really important when you are a criminal, so you don't look foolish.

So it is important when you are a criminal (I hope I'm not educating any of our people here today), but it is very important if you are going to rob somebody, to have a good getaway vehicle. So they got the plan together. One of these three guys was going to rob a convenience store. They were going to take all of the food and take all of the rum. But, they couldn't carry it all [since it was] just the three of them. So they needed a good getaway vehicle to do that. In order to do that, they decided they would get a donkey.

So far the heist was going pretty well. They got into the store, robbed it at gun point and took all of the stuff. They made more than one trip back and forth and loaded the down the donkey.

Pretty soon, that donkey was really loaded down, because there were dozens and dozens of bottles of rum, and food of every kind you can imagine. It is so heavy that Xavi, the donkey, who was 10 years old, decided that it, frankly, was a little bit too heavy, and he was not going to move. The guys had it all planned, but they just didn't think of this, so they are pulling on the donkey.

Well, donkeys are stubborn for a reason. He wouldn't pull the load.

Finally, one of them [the gang members] had a really good idea: we will whip the donkey. Well, when they started whipping the donkey – apparently – (I never grew up around donkeys. I don't know too much about them.) but apparently when donkeys get really angry, they like scream, "Waaaaaaaaa," really loud.

While this was going on, the gang members were cursing and hitting this donkey. The donkey was screaming at the top of his lungs. It was so loud the police came to find out what the ruckus was all about. [Laughter.] Now, the gang members ran in all directions and, the part I never got to hear was, whether Xavi, the donkey, ended up going to jail for being an accomplice in the crime, or whether he got a medal for thwarting the crime. [Laughter.]

If you go through the paper, and you look it up, over and over again you are amazed at all of the *stupidity* of all of these criminals.

I remember Jill and I were just married. We moved to Chicago, and I went back for my final year of seminary. We were looking in the paper one day, in the Chicago Tribune, and here were two guys from the inner city who decided that they really needed money. So, they got a couple of hunting rifles and they were going to go out and hunt deer. They knew they needed a license, but they decided they couldn't afford a license and it wasn't hunting season, but they really needed that meat now. So they went out to hunt that deer. So, they shot the deer – illegally – on somebody else's land, without a permit, or the right time of year.

They put it on [top of the car], and, oh, my gosh. There was just these two guys and they didn't realize how heavy a deer was. They were hauling this deer and it was *so* heavy. As they were driving from southern Wisconsin back to Chicago, this deer was so heavy it was collapsing the roof of the car. All of these people were pointing [at them] as they were driving by.

Finally, they heard a siren. These poor guys didn't know the difference between a deer and a cow. [Laughter.] There was a picture of this in the Chicago Tribune. They had been in the city all of their lives and had never been in the country. [Laughter.]

So, if you are going to be a criminal, at least be a good one. [Laughter.] Learn the difference between having a little bit of wisdom or foolishness.

In a warped sort of way, that was what Paul was attempting to do with Ephesians. He was trying to tell them that sin, over and over again, is foolishness at work in your life. Every time you sin you are making a mistake. You are making a foolish decision.

Now, when you are young, you don't have enough life experience to understand how foolish you are being when you are making a mistake - when you are sinning, when you choose to do something bad. Now, when you are six years old, you think you are being real cunning, as you are stealing the 17th peanut butter cup out of the refrigerator; but your parents know, when you are an only child, who is taking it. [Laughter.]

As you get older, you think you are getting smarter, but no, sin and foolishness go hand in hand. Even if you can get away with it, I'm sure God is sitting up there going, "Oh, Good Lord, do they think I'm not looking? Do they think I'm missing this?" That is the frustration that God must have every minute with how foolish we are.

Paul, in the book of Ephesians, talks about this evil time, trying to reel the Ephesians in. "*Don't get caught up in the foolishness and the evil of this world...*" because you will look bad, and because you are representing Christ. "You are making me look bad," God is saying to them. "Don't do it."

We live in the same kind of evil time. We are so advanced technologically and scientifically - but we make the same stupid mistakes that we were making 2000 years ago when Ephesians was written. We look just as foolish, We are making the same sort of problems. Right now we hear people saying, "Yeah, he stole - but he is a good person." Or, we hear, "They are immigrants trying to help their lives - but they are animals."

It doesn't fit. There is *evil* and there is *foolishness* in what we are saying, but if we are powerful enough, or we are wealthy enough, we can say whatever we want and people will believe it.

So our task, as the Christian Church, is to help people see the difference between wisdom and foolishness when in the world - the evil world - in which we live, is sometimes very hard to distinguish the difference.

Now, I will often say to families and especially (I know a number of people who don't go to church anywhere - we are just friends, or are acquaintances, or family) I will often say, "If you go to church as a family, that doesn't mean that your children are going to be perfect; but I can pretty much guarantee you that your kids will be more healthy, spiritually-strong and successful in life - 99 times out of 100 - if they go to church. They will say, "How do you know that?" and I often say, "Because you are pretty smart, and you are a good person, and you might even be a good parent, but no parent is good enough to raise a child [alone]."

When Hannah was young, Jill and I were very lucky. We had hundreds - or thousands, literally - [of] grandparents, uncles and aunts in all of our churches who helped us raise this child. There were times, when she was an adolescent, when mom and dad "didn't know anything," but it was amazing how other people's parents and grandparents they were smart. She wouldn't listen to us sometimes, but she would listen to them. You don't have to raise your children alone when you are in church, when you are part of a church family. They [your children] may look at you like you are foolish as parents but they will listen to the wisdom around the congregation.

My daughter, your children and I - when I was growing up - were so blessed to have learned from the other saints in the congregations that I grew up in. Even when I didn't listen to my mother or my grandmother, I always listened to my youth directors, to the Sunday School teachers - oh, my gosh - to the pastors, and that is what we offer. That is what we can offer that very few other places in this world can.

Then you add to that, this is where the Holy Spirit resides, in its strongest place, in the life of the family of the household of Jesus Christ. That is why they call church "the body of Christ." It is where Christ resides and the Holy Spirit moves. Now that doesn't mean that every kid that comes out of this program is going to be a winner, but every one of our kids will be richer in Spirit, a little less foolish and have a depth in expression of how to respond in difficult situations, because they have learned so much from so many.

That's why when teachers stand up here and be approved when they go out into the schools, or when we bless our Wednesday night or Sunday school teachers and our youth people, and all of us who are praying for them and loving them, that is the blessing - that they don't have to make all of the wrong decisions, because they have watched the depth of your love and your care for them; so they don't turn out like Dennis Hawkins, that I read about just recently from Pittsburgh, Pa.

Now, Dennis - I won't say is the representative of Pittsburgh, because I know Pittsburgh people and some of them have turned out pretty well - but Dennis, poor guy, didn't. Dennis

was 48 years old and didn't have a penny to his name. So, he had a plan. He was going to rob a bank, because that is where all of the money is.

Dennis decided he didn't want anyone to know what he looked like, so he decided he would get a costume. A good robber needs a good disguise, so he decided he would look like a woman. He put on this big wig, a very big brassiere and clown pants, so nobody would know it was him.

It worked. He put the gun on the person in the bank and he got all of the money. But, you know, you can't think of everything. Dennis Hawkins forgot you need a getaway car. He should have talked to the Columbian guys about a donkey, at least.

So he runs across the street to the gas station, holding the bag of money, where he thinks he can rob somebody in their car. But, everybody saw him coming - running across the street in his clown pants and wig, and holding this bag of money. So they got in their cars and fled.

So he starts walking down the street and he decides to take a look at the money. That's when he opens the bag and the red dye hit him in the face. He got blasted with the dye and, finally, he just sat down on the curb and waited for the police, because the police had received a description of a man. (I'm thinking, "A man?" because he was wearing a really good disguise.) You see the other thing Dennis forgot, besides the car, was he forgot to shave his mustache and his goatee. [Laughter.] So he waited for them [the police] and he was so frustrated, because the clown pants didn't work, everybody drove away and he was full of red dye. He sat there and held out his hands as they [the police] drove up.

We don't want to be that foolish in our faith, or in our lives. We want to make the *right* decisions. We want to make *holy, wise* decisions in the time we have in this world, and we can do that through studying our Bible, living the faith, singing the faith and offering it to each other and to our children. When we do that, we fulfill what Paul's letter to the Corinthians said: *We can face this evil and overcome it, through the wisdom and blessing of God and the Holy Spirit.*

And, may we pray for our children this week, as they go back to school and learn to be wise. Amen.