

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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### Ephesians 5:15-20 (NRSV)

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, [16] making the most of the time, because the days are evil. [17] So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. [18] Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, [19] as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, [20] giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### THE DAYS ARE EVIL

The days are evil. Thus says Paul to the Christians at Ephesus.

We can understand why Paul would say this. When he wrote his letter to the Ephesians he was once again in prison. Several times in this letter Paul refers to himself as the “prisoner of Christ” or as the “prisoner of God.” And finally as he closes his letter Paul refers to himself as an “ambassador in chains.”

The days were evil for Paul and for the early church. They were persecuted in many ways. Terrible things were happening all the time.

But, the same could be said of almost any age, especially ours. Watch the news on almost any day and you can see the truth of that statement. The days are evil. Murder, child abuse, hostage taking, terrorism and war lead the broadcast.

I have the answer for that problem. Unless there is something very important happening I avoid the news. It’s good for my blood pressure.

But, of course we can’t avoid the bad news forever. There’s bad news not only on a national and international level but also on a personal level. We live in an anxious and uncertain age.

Families are coming apart at the seams under the pressures of modern life. Many of us struggle with problems that seem to defy a solution. Some of us face demons that keep us up at night and threaten to unravel our lives.

I thought about the Ramsey family and how their lives had been turned upside down by the murder of their little girl. Suspicion fell upon their family and for ten years their life was tormented by evil. This week a suspect was arrested and confessed to the murder but it's not at all certain that he is really the murderer.

But, this story has once again raised my awareness of the evil nature of our society.

Not only was a little girl brutally murdered, but the news media is using this opportunity to again exploit their tragedy.

Once again the news media is bringing out the photos of the beauty pageants and rehashing the terrible details of the crime. For me this terrible tragedy symbolizes what Paul is talking about.

The days are evil.

Bad things happen to good people.

Justice is delayed too long.

And many seem to revel in the tragedy of others.

So how do we respond to the evil days?

Paul told the Ephesian Christians who were undergoing persecution and faced an uncertain future that they could respond to the evil days in two ways.

One way was foolish and one way was wise.

## SELF-DESTRUCTION

The foolish response was to give up and give in to the ways of the world. Paul talked about those who lead a very unreflective, destructive lifestyle.

They didn't factor God's will into the equation. The rules didn't apply to them. They weren't careful about how they lived.

And so they responded to the anxiety in their life and the evil in their world by running away. And as so many have done down through the ages, many ran away from their problems by using alcohol.

Paul spoke against those who got drunk on wine and on account of that fell into a life of debauchery.

The abuse of alcohol can be terribly destructive. Some of us know that from hard personal experience. Instead of controlling ourselves, the alcohol controls us.

But, alcoholism is a symptom of a deeper problem, a spiritual problem. In anxious and uncertain times people try to fill that hole in their heart with too much strong drink ... or they work too much or they eat too much food or they play too much golf or they do too much whatever. Fill in the blank. Too much of anything is a sign of spiritual malnutrition.

Our obsessive, often destructive behavior is a sign of a spiritual need. When we ignore God's will in these evil times we are subject to being (as Paul put it earlier in this letter) "tossed to and fro, blown about by every wind of doctrine." (Ephesians 4:14)

If we try to fill a spiritual need with an obsession, we will be tossed to and fro by a variety of doctrines.

Sometimes my allergies keep me up at night, and I go into the next room and turn on the TV. In the middle of the night the TV contains an inordinate amount of that peculiar breed of entertainment labeled the infomercial.

I'm convinced that the people who do these infomercials make their living off of people who have an unresolved spiritual need.

They promise health, wealth, beauty, a new girlfriend, cleaner floors and even a better golf score. My favorite is a magnetic bracelet that is supposed to

calm my nerves when I'm putting. That would have to be a really strong magnet.

These infomercials are doctrines, strong winds that promise a kind of salvation.

And they all have one thing in common. They don't work. And even if they did work, they wouldn't give us what we really need.

We need more than good golf scores or perfect skin or a new girlfriend. That empty spot in our heart is a God shaped void, and as Augustine put it, our hearts will remain restless until they rest in God.

Someone once said, "You've got to fill a man (or woman) with something." In other words, in order to be satisfied in life, we need a reason for our existence. We need to be filled. We need a purpose in life. And if our life has no purpose, we will continue to foolishly fill our lives with things that do not satisfy. We will be at the mercy of the evil times that have befallen us.

## CAREFUL LIVING

But, if we believe that our lives have a higher purpose, then there is a reason to live a more disciplined and reflective life. Paul encourages the Ephesians to be careful how they live. Since they are "children of the light," they are encouraged to "live in the light." (Ephesians 15:8) They are to seek those things that are good and right and true.

"Anything goes" is not a Christian motto. The Bible tells us that our life and our body are the temple of God's Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

And if we live carelessly, it's as if we are vandalizing God's temple. We are rejecting the fact that our life is holy and important to God. We are replacing God's purpose for our life with the latest fad or whim.

I'm sick to death of seeing people I love being destroyed by careless living, filling their lives with destructive behaviors because they have lost hope. But, I also know that I can never help them out of that pit by merely criticizing their behavior.

Somehow they need to catch the vision that God has something more and better for their lives. God does love them and God does have a plan for their lives.

But, for those of us who believe that, we are encouraged by this passage to live like we believe it.

We are encouraged to live a careful life.

## THE CAT

Let me give you an image of what that might mean.

A Christian bought a piece of property in a “transitional neighborhood.” For those of you who don’t know a transitional neighborhood is the bad side of town that someone hope will become the good side of town in the near future.

Anyway this particular house had a broad brick wall that surrounded it. And on top of that wall the previous owner had embedded many sharp objects such as nails and broken glass to discourage the numerous vandals in the area from climbing over the wall.

But, according to the new owner this did not discourage his new neighbor’s cat who was intent on climbing on top of this forbidding wall. The first time the cat tried to climb the wall he landed on a piece of glass and cut his paw. But, as we know, cats are curious creatures and not easily discouraged. He soon scaled the wall again, but this time he was more careful in his approach.

He found an appropriate place to light was able to walk gingerly along the top, picking each step with extreme care. The cat would look from side to side and occasionally even take a little leap into the air so as to land on a spot that was free from those sharp, protruding objects.

The Christian who bought this piece of property said,  
“The sight of that cat walking on our wall gave me a new appreciation of Ephesians 5:15, “Be careful how you walk.”

That cat walked thoughtfully, carefully and safely along the treacherous pathway. The cat wasn't paralyzed by the danger, but he did take the danger into consideration.

That should be our approach to life. We should be careful in our approach to life because the days are evil. There is much that is good in our world, but there are also many pitfalls as well.

There are (as the hymn, Amazing Grace puts it) many "dangers, toils and snares." And our insecurities and fears make us vulnerable to those troubles.

I sometimes think that we in the old mainline churches have failed to sound that warning clearly enough. We have not encouraged our people to be careful about how they live. These are difficult days, and each and every decision we make is important.

Bishop Fulton Sheen once said that the difference between a river and a swamp is that the river has borders while the swamp has none.

If we aren't careful about how we live, then our lives have no borders and our life energy flows in all directions and becomes stagnant.

But, if we live carefully, if we pay attention to God's will and channel our life's energies according to his law, then our lives are like a river, focused and flowing in a positive direction.

## SETTLING FOR A LIFE ON THE GROUND

The philosopher, Soren Kerkegaard once told a story about a wild duck flying south with other ducks. Below him in a barnyard he noticed some corn a farmer had scattered for his tame ducks. So the duck broke formation and joined the tame ducks in the barnyard. He ate the corn, liked it, and decided to stay a few days.

The corn was free and life was easy, so he stayed longer. Spring eventually came. And one day, high overhead, the duck heard his wild mates calling as they flew by on their way back north.

Their call reminded him of his true life, but when he tried to rejoin them, he could no longer fly. He had settled for ease and comfort. He had given in to a life of collecting corn off of the ground.

I think this often happens when we are not careful how we live. We become less than we were meant to be.

Most educators can tell you stories about students who were bright and talented. But, they chose not to make the most of their time. They settled for a life on the ground when they could have soared.

## MAKING THE MOST OF TIME

According to Paul, in a spiritual sense, the same could be true for many Christians. The true life, the careful life involves making the most of our time. (Ephesians 5:16) Time is not just one thing after another. For the Christian time is a sacred resource. Time is a gift from God.

Long before the invention of the mechanical timepiece the Chinese developed a unique way of determining the hour of the day. A small rope was tied in knots that were evenly spaced. When the rope was set on fire, it took 60 minutes for the cord to burn from one knot to another.

Each morning a new “string of hours” would be inserted in the holder. As the people viewed the charred remains of yesterday’s rope, they were reminded that “time past is ashes” and can never be reclaimed.

The Psalmist said something similar when he prayed, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” We would spend much less time complaining and doing destructive things if we understand the precious and limited nature of time.

When the apostle tells us to “make the most of our time” the word used for time is the Greek word “kairos.” Kairos means the opportune time, the time of God’s redemption.

Kairos is not just keeping time or letting time pass. Kairos is an acknowledgement that we are on God’s time.

If we are careful and reflective in our approach to life, if we try to look at our lives from God’s perspective, we begin to see the opportunities that each moment affords. We are not just counting the hours until the weekend; we are living for our Lord. And that makes a world of difference.

Have you ever noticed how much time you spend waiting for something else to happen?

We wait for lunch, for quitting time, for holidays or for vacation.

Suppose we were careful to acknowledge the importance of this moment?

Suppose we were to seriously ask ourselves,  
“What is God’s will for my life here and now?” (5:17)

According to our passage for today, such a question would truly be sobering. Instead of filling ourselves with wine, we would be filled with God’s Spirit.

Instead of singing drinking songs our lives would be filled with hymns of praise and thanksgiving. (5:19)

Instead of always complaining about the things that we lack, we would find reason to always give thanks to God for the many blessings that are ours, especially the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

## AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

And this brings us to the most important thing we need to do in order to overcome the evil days. We live carefully, we make the most of our time and we celebrate the blessings that God has given us. We live with an attitude of gratitude.

Marcus Barth, a biblical scholar tells us that the early church was a “singing, jubilant, exultant” assembly. And we see that attitude in this passage. Paul talks about singing “hymns, psalms and spiritual songs.” He speaks once again (as he does so often in his letters) about giving thanks to God “at all times.”

In recent times there has been an outpouring of God’s Spirit in Africa. A missionary from the Congo said that he had never seen so much “unmitigated joy in worship.” He wrote,

"I've been in evangelical churches where folks were well-trained to 'act' joyous...But here, it's no act. It's not Pentecostal ecstasy either, but a kind of reasoned joy.

And, probably the most joyous times are the offering times--the singing reaches its loudest, the dancing and clapping is at its most unbridled. Usually, there are at least two offerings per worship service--one for the parish, the other for the poor.

Worshippers come forward dancing and singing to put their money into a box at the front of the worship place.

I most enjoy watching the older men dance to the front, chuck their money in the box, and then dance back to their places. They're dressed to the nines and do a kind of understated two-step.

Can you imagine in one of our churches in the United States, where the clerk of session or the chair of the finance committee would come forward with his or her offering like this?

It's great stuff! It's especially great because it's so extraordinarily sincere, in no way contrived."

In comparison to the church in Africa, we have a long way to go when it comes to joyful worship. None of my clerks of session have done the two step ... at least not in response to the offering!

But, we can bring joy and gratitude to our worship and our life. Indeed, this is why music is so important in the church.

It is not a performance. It is a way to express gratitude and joy to God. And gratitude and joy will go a long way toward overcoming the evil that threatens to choke the life out of our life.

Today I invite you to be careful how you live. Fill your life with new wine, the joy and hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

And may our gratitude and joy spill over into a life of thanksgiving and praise.

Amen.

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN**