

Ephesians 5:15-20

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.

WATCH YOUR STEP

When I was growing up we lived by certain rules in our family. We were careful people. Don't quit the job you have until you get a new one. Always pay cash. Watch your step.

I bet many of you had rules like this in your family as well. It pays to be careful.

But, what does it mean to be careful Christians? How can we watch our step?

It's about more than being prudent. It's about being wise in a spiritual sense. The wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God's kingdom are not the same. Watching your step from a Christian standpoint does not mean safety first, last and always ... far from it.

Watching your step means evaluating everything through the lens of God's word. Watching your step means remembering that God's ways are often not our ways.

So what does the Bible say about God's wisdom?

WISDOM IS GOD'S GIFT

First of all wisdom is not something that we can get on our own. Indeed, that was the basic sin of Adam and Eve. They thought that they could get smart on their own terms. They could become wise by eating of the forbidden tree. They could become like gods.

I had a friend who used to say that sometimes all education does is make us clever devils!

That can be true. Education is important. But, education alone does not make us wise. Those of you who have been around institutions of higher learning know what I mean. Sometimes the smartest people in the land seem absolutely clueless in some other ways.

Indeed the Bible tells us that sometimes God chooses the foolish people on purpose to show that God's kingdom doesn't depend upon what we can do. It depends upon what God chooses to do through us.

(1 Corinthians 1:26-27)

WISDOM AND WORSHIP

Second, biblical wisdom is based upon worship. According to the Psalmist, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Psalm 111:10) This doesn't mean that we should be afraid of God. It means that we should be filled with awe by the God who created the universe.

Sometimes we Christians are too shallow in the way that we act and think. We succumb to petty arguments and disagreements. It is obvious that we shouldn't act and think this way. What is not so obvious is the cure.

The cure for shallow living is to worship. Worship can bring us comfort when nothing else can. Worship helps us put it all in perspective. Worship can encourage us to do the right thing when everyone else seems bent on a path of self-destruction.

One of the best devotional books I have ever read is a book by A.W. Tozer entitled, "The Pursuit of God." In that book Tozer notes that we talk a lot about God, but quite often we fail to spend any time actually desiring the presence of God in our life. We never seem to have time to be still and listen for the voice of God in our lives. What we need to do is pursue God.

WAIT UPON THE LORD

Many of us think that we are pursuing God and God's will. But, I have found that we often substitute our plan for God's plan. We do what we want to do and call it God's will.

This is a very unwise way to live. Whenever I feel dissatisfaction growing in my life, I find that the problem often lies with the fact that I am not waiting upon God's guidance. Instead, I am charging ahead with my plans and assuming that God's ways are my ways.

But, of course that is almost never true. And I often waste a lot of time with matters that are not all that important.

Every life must have a balance between doing and reflecting, worship and service.

This is what Paul meant when he advised us to be careful. We need to trust the Lord and not rely upon our own understanding. (cf. Proverbs 3:5) This is the essence of wisdom.

As the prophet Isaiah put it, "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31)

THE DAYS ARE EVIL

When the prophet Isaiah wrote that long ago, God's people had a lot to worry about. As Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, the days were evil. (Ephesians 5:16) They faced military defeat and exile.

There was nothing that they could do on their own to change the problems that they faced. But, the prophet reminded them that salvation would come from upon high. Though they had been unfaithful God would remain faithful. If they waited upon God, God would give them what they needed for the journey. God would restore their strength and hope.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians the days were also evil. Paul was a prisoner and would soon face execution. Some of the Christians in Ephesus may soon pay for their faith in blood as well. Reading between the lines we understand that the church in Ephesus was a church in turmoil. There was conflict between Jews and Gentiles. There was anger and serious disagreement in the church.

One commentator said that this "forlorn little church" was "hanging on by its fingernails."

What about today? Are the days evil? Some seem to think so. They are deep divisions in the world based upon race and religion and political philosophy. We face war and the greed of people who will say anything and do anything to get rich.

Things could be worse. But, we do not need to sugar coat the obvious fact. There is evil in our world today, and it is rampant.

REDEEM THE TIME

So, what do we do? Do we curse the darkness and pray that the apocalypse will come soon? I think that many have taken that approach. Perhaps that's why so many Christians are interested in predicting when the end of the world will occur. They've had enough of this world. The days are evil.

But, Paul suggests a different approach. Paul doesn't say, "The days are evil. Therefore just withdraw from the world and wait for it all to end." Instead, Paul says, "Since the days are evil make sure that you make a difference in the world." In verse 16 we read make "the most of the time" that you have "because the days are evil." The literal reading of that verse is, "Redeem the time because the days are evil."

To put it another way, instead of cursing the darkness, we are to light a candle. God has chosen to bring salvation to the world in us and through us. Remember that's what Jesus told his disciples. They were to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." Just a little salt can change the flavor of a meal, and just a little light can light up a dark room.

In a time of great difficulty the deadliest sin may well be the sin of pessimism. If we think that this world of ours is beyond saving, then we are obviously not trusting in God's grace and plan. Surely the God who created heaven and earth can recreate us. A new creation is possible.

Not only is it possible; we have been given a down payment on that new creation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We have read the the book, and we know what will happen in the end. Evil will not triumph. God's grace will triumph. The Savior we serve is not dead and buried. The tomb is empty, and his Spirit is with us here and now helping us proclaim the Gospel in our own time and place.

That means Christians are not given the luxury of being pessimists. We don't get to play "ain't it awful" with the rest of the world. Instead, in these evil days we get to breathe new life into a tired old world. We get to say that God isn't finished with us yet. There will come a time when evil will not rule. We have the audacity to have hope while all around us others are proclaiming despair.

DESPAIR AND ADDICTION

One evidence of despair in a person's life is addictive behavior. In this case Paul mentions alcohol abuse. He wrote, "Don't get drunk on wine for that leads to debauchery." The word translated debauchery is related to the Greek word for prodigal.

You may remember that the prodigal son moved away from the people who loved him and the things he knew to be right. His excesses and abuses almost killed him. It was only when he hit bottom and came to himself that he realized his hope lay not in staying in the pig pen but going home to his father.

That, of course was Jesus' picture of what it was like to return to God. Each week in our church fellowship hall there are people who meet together for support because their lives have been turned upside down by the abuse of alcohol.

Addictive behavior is responsible for more crime than any other factor. The sheriff in North Carolina once told me that fully 80 to 90 percent of the crimes committed in our county were alcohol and drug related.

FILLING THE VOID

But, again it's not enough to just say, "Don't get drunk or don't do drugs." We have to understand the root cause of the problem. Why do people drink too much? Why do people abuse drugs? And for that matter why do people eat too much or shop too much or gamble too much or work too much or even play golf too much?

There is often an emptiness in our life that needs to be filled with something. And so we try to fill that emptiness with compulsive, addictive behavior. We try to escape the pain and fear of our life in some way. It may work for a while, but soon the demons of self-doubt will return with a vengeance.

According to Paul, we should replace our addictive behavior with God's presence. Instead of being filled with wine we should be filled with the Spirit. How can we be filled with the Spirit? That seems like something that is beyond our control.

A NEW SONG

Actually, that's not true. Being filled with the Spirit is aided by the songs we sing in our heart.

Paul wrote that we should be filled with the Spirit "as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts ..."

Our Scripture is filled with many songs. Almost all of the Psalms were hymns. In fact some of the Psalms even seem to have instructions for liturgical dance! Can you imagine us dancing down the isles as we take up our offering?

That might be a bit too much for us staid Presbyterians, but we must not miss the main point. All of us can make music to the Lord in our hearts. I know that some people can't carry a tune, but that doesn't mean you can't sing to the Lord in your heart.

Today's participatory anthem is a good example of how this can work. A very serious message can be engrained upon our hearts with a catchy melody.

"What does the Lord require of you? But to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God." I bet you wake up singing that song tomorrow! And that's not such a bad thing. God can use that song to fill you up with something good. Music has the power to change our hearts for the better.

Today is a hot humid day in August and the newspaper headlines remind us that they days are evil. Many of us are filled with guilt for all that we have done wrong ... how we have messed up our own lives and the lives of others.

But, Paul tells us, "You'll be surprised what a difference a doxology can make in your life. When we praise God in our heart we find that somehow the time has been redeemed and we are able to give thanks.

GIVING THANKS

That brings us to our last point. Besides music there is one more than that can fill our hearts with the Spirit and that is gratitude. In verse 20 we read that the Spirit filled life is “giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Sometimes you think that Paul gets carried away with his promises. How can we give thanks at all times and for everything? That seems unrealistic in many cases.

But, notice the qualifiers in this last verse. We give thanks “to God the Father ... in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words we give thanks for the salvation of God that occurs in the midst of our troubles.

LES MISERABLES

Let me give you an example from a famous novel, Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*.

Early in his novel, Hugo describes the downward plunge of Jean Valjean. Jean was once a prominent young man but due to financial reversals becomes a common laborer. He is sentenced to five years in prison for stealing bread to feed his family.

Five years in prison take a toll upon the young man. And to make matters worse the sentence is extended to nineteen years of hard labor in the galley ships of France. Jean becomes more of a brute beast than a man. His soul dries up.

Finally he is released from captivity but Jean’s troubles are far from over. No one will hire him or even talk to him because of his criminal record.

Embittered and exhausted Valjean comes to the home of an old bishop who greets him courteously and treats the ragged, forlorn beggar as an honored guest. The hardened criminal is puzzled by the bishop’s graciousness and generosity, but despite his good treatment he cynically steals two fine plates from the bishop’s cupboard and flees into the darkness.

The next day the police arrive at the bishop’s house with the captured criminal and the silver. It looks like Valjean will spend the rest of his life in prison.

But, at this point in the story the unexpected happens.

The bishop says, “I’m glad to see you. But, you misunderstood. I gave you the candlesticks, too, which would bring 200 francs. Why didn’t you take them along with the cutlery when you departed?”

The police leave and the bishop embraces Valjean warmly and then sends him away with this blessing,

“Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts ... and I give it to God.”

And it works. Jean regains a glimpse of his humanity. He has been given a gift; his own true God given self. And gratitude sweeps Jean up into a whole new world.

GRACE AND GRATITUDE

Something similar has happened to the Christians at Ephesus.

According to Paul’s letter many of them were formerly pagans. But now they have become Christians. They were Gentiles who had absolutely no claim upon the promise of Israel. And yet by the wondrous embrace of Christ these Gentiles have become members of God’s family.

These outsiders had become insiders. And that’s why they were to give thanks all the time. In the words of the hymn, Amazing Grace, they once were lost but now are found ... was blind but now they see.

A preacher told of a friend who had a terrible heart valve defect. He was told that he would surely die without a very risky operation. The man sought out a great surgeon and submitted himself to the operation, and the operation was a success.

A few years later the preacher and his formerly ill friend were in a very difficult situation. The malfeasance of some coworkers made it necessary for them to do a lot of extra work and sometimes work late at night. The preacher said that he noticed his friend didn’t seem to be in as much misery as he was so he asked why.

And the friend replied, “Well, when you have nearly died and have your life given back to you ... well, you tend to be grateful.”

Sometimes we forget how we got here. We forget why we come to worship on Sundays. We’re not here because we’re the best and the brightest. We’re not here because we’re the nicest people in town.

We’re here because we have been saved by grace through faith. It’s God’s gift and not our achievement. We don’t have one reason to boast except for the grace of God in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

And so we are grateful. Like Jean Valjean we have been given our lives back. And we give thanks in all times and in all places in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God help us to be careful about how we live. May He put a song of thanksgiving in our hearts that will last forever.

Amen.