

A WISE WALK



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 Ephesians 5:15-21
 Eighth Message
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Resuming our studies in the book of Ephesians, this morning we will touch on the most important relationships in life: those between husbands and wives, parents and children, and employees and employers. The challenge for us will be to allow Christ to invade the critical arenas of family, home, and work, so that these relationships might be all that God intends. This is no small order. Two things are essential: the believer's humility and God's Spirit. We need the power of God, combined with our willingness to let go and learn.

Let us pray earnestly for what God will teach us and how he might transform us in the next few weeks. If we do not live in anticipation that he is at work, and that he is able to change us, then all we are left with is a mere mental exercise in Bible study. What is our purpose, the gaining of information or the miracle of transformation? The gospel is the very miracle of transformation!

The main theme of Ephesians 4-6 is the Christian life, or, to use Paul's term, the Christian "walk." He uses this word several times in these chapters, describing how believers should conduct their lives. In 4:1, he exhorts that we "walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." The apostle began this letter by enumerating the blessings of being "in Christ." As a result of that standing we are to walk in a manner that corresponds to those blessings. We do not walk worthy so as to gain blessing; we do so because we have been blessed. If we do not know that we are blessed, then our walk will falter.

In 4:17-18, Paul exhorted believers to not walk like the Gentiles, "in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding." As Gentiles, we were alienated, excluded from the promises of God, but Christ destroyed the dividing wall of the Law. Now, Jews and Gentiles are joined in unity, as both have equal access to God. We no longer have to live, nor should we live, in the way we did before we were saved. In chapter 4 Paul also explained the principle for how to implement a worthy walk: we are to take off the old man, renew our mind, and put on the new man.

In chapter 5, the apostle instructed us to be imitators of God and to walk in love, like Christ. Many seek to pattern their lives after someone they want to emulate: their father, their mother, President Bush, or some popular figure. But Paul tells us to walk in sacrificial love, like Christ did.

Finally, in our last study we learned about walking in sexual purity. Instead of walking in darkness we are to

walk as children of light, because we are light in the Lord. We are to expose sexual darkness around us so that people awaken and walk into the light of Christ. The darkness has power only as long as it remains dark.

Our text today exhorts us to be careful how we walk, not as unwise but as wise men and women. Perhaps all of these references to walking are summed up in the apostle's words in 2:10: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."

Here then is our text from Ephesians 5:

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. (Eph 5:15-21, NASB)

These verses highlight three sets of opposites: unwise versus wise; foolish versus understanding; drunk with wine versus filled with the Spirit. The apostle's theme, centering on a wise walk, is applied to three areas of life –time, understanding, and the controlling influence in life.

Paul begins with the exhortation to be careful how we walk, "not as unwise men but as wise." Wisdom is the skill of living life beautifully, in harmony with God's design. It is the main theme of the book of Proverbs, and the quality that Solomon prized over gold and silver—at least initially. This is the skill that Moses prayed for in Psalm 90:

**As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years,
 Or if due to strength, eighty years,
 Yet their pride is but labor and sorrow;
 For soon it is gone and we fly away.
 Who understands the power of Your anger
 And Your fury, according to the fear that is due
 You?
 So teach us to number our days,
 That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.**
 (Psalm 90:10-12)

Walking wisely is a skill that does not come easily, however. We see this in Paul's initial command to "be careful," or "look carefully." If we are to walk wisely, then how we live demands careful scrutiny and evaluation. Life is filled with obstacles and traps. Our eyes must be fully open and aware. We must walk in the light of the truth instead of groping around in the darkness. This takes effort on our part. It does not come easily or naturally. Our steps need to be accurate and precise.

Someone asks, "Why should we care about our walk? It's too difficult. I get discouraged and feel guilty when I fail." Why shouldn't we seek sexual exploits and act greedily? It is because the way we live matters to God, so it should matter to us. We were created for something beautiful and redeemed for something fantastic. We bear the image of God. Our lives count. Everything we do is important. We will be much more joyful and fruitful and a pleasure to be around if we give careful attention to what we do and how we do it. If we really want to be selfish about it, it makes no sense to throw in the towel and live like the world lives. Doing that would only make us miserable.

Hardly a day goes by that we don't come across a sign that says, "Watch your step." These notices are placed in places where the footing is tricky: a steep staircase, a slippery path, a dangerous cliff. If we are not careful we may injure ourselves or someone else. Signs are there for our safety. It pays to heed them. This is what Paul is saying: be careful, watch your step.

Now for the three elements of a wise walk.

A. A Wise Use of Time – "redeeming the time because the days are evil."

The first area we need to pay attention to is our use of time. Paul says we are to "redeem" the time. The word was a market place term for setting someone free by paying a price. When we "redeem" time, we are buying time back. And we do so "because the days are evil." In other words, if we just do what we feel like doing, if we don't take an active role in monitoring our use of time, then it will be used to evil ends.

In the book of Proverbs, this idea of letting things go is pictured by the sluggard:

I passed by the field of the sluggard
And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,
And behold, it was completely overgrown with
thistles;
Its surface was covered with nettles,
And its stone wall was broken down.
When I saw, I reflected upon it;
I looked, and received instruction.
"A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest,"
Then your poverty will come as a robber
And your want like an armed man. (Prov 24:30-34)

In order to walk wisely we must redeem the time and buy up opportunities. As Christians, we cannot live passively. We must use time actively or else it will default to evil, worthless things that don't contribute towards eternal life. One thing that comes to mind in this regard is watching television for hours on end, or watching something that's not healthy for us. The person who redeems the time views only what he or she intended to watch. Some television may be worthwhile, but much of it is not.

It was Kipling who wrote the well-known lines:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run
Yours is the earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

There are ways to redeem time other than by avoiding evil and waste. Redeeming the time means that we take time to rest and recreate, too. Activities that recharge and center us are valuable. A life that does not have margin for play and rest is just as unbalanced as a life of laziness.

Redeeming the time means that we decide between better and best. We will always have more to do than we can possibly accomplish. We can't solve the problem by trying to cram as many things as we can into the day. We redeem the time by doing the things we should do and avoiding those we should not. This can be difficult. We have to make decisions. We have to say no. We must have good boundaries. We have to stop seeking our worth through performance. The good is always the enemy of the best.

Redeeming the time means that we do not become slaves to the tyranny of the urgent. It's tempting to allow the urgent things to crowd out the important. One author put it this way:

The problem is that the important thing rarely has to be done today, or even this week. Those extra hours of prayer and Bible study, that non-Christian friend to be visited, the book that requires careful study: These projects do not have to be done today. The urgent tasks are the ones that call for instant action. They seem at the moment to be important and irresistible, so they devour our energy. But in light of time's perspective their importance fades, and we see the important things we have failed to do. We've been slaves to the tyranny of the urgent.¹

This is always a problem for me when I have several little things and one major thing to do. I tend to clear my desk of all the odds and ends so that I can concentrate on the one thing that is really important. But I find that when I finish the trivial things, I am too tired or distracted to focus on the most important thing. We have to "redeem" the time, and this does not happen automatically.

B. Understanding the will of the Lord – "stop being foolish."

The second area in which we need to be wise is that of our understanding. Paul says, "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph 5:17). "Foolish" means to be senseless, unthinking and unwise—the opposite of observing carefully. A person who is foolish gives no consideration to thoughtful planning. In Proverbs, a foolish character is said to be naïve or simple-minded. He is open to anything. He is gullible and vulnerable, lacking understanding.

In contrast to the fool, Christians must understand the "will of the Lord." While we are to be wise about the world, we are to primarily be wise about the ways of God. Here I want to say that the "will of the Lord" is a greatly misunderstood concept. There are two aspects to the will of God: his general will and his particular will. God's general will, revealed in the Scriptures, is the same for every Christian: it is to become like Christ. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul says that God's will for believers is our sanctification (4:3). Elsewhere he describes God's will as "the summing up of all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10) and always giving thanks (1 Thess 5:18).

This means that if we are growing in the grace of God, we are perfectly in his will. His will is not primarily dependent on where we live, our occupation, or whether we are married or not. We may not care for our present circumstances, but that never stands in the way of being in God's will, since we can all walk in love, live in truth and grow in character, no matter our circumstances. If we are not growing in grace and godliness, then it makes no difference what our circumstances are, we will not be in God's will.

Misunderstandings in this area arise from books and sermons that teach that if we are in God's perfect will, then we will be perfectly happy. If this were true, then some of the most profound lives ever lived lacked God's will and were a waste. I cannot accept that.

Now beyond God's primary will, God does care about the type of job we have and how we spend our hours and days. He does not want us to be miserable. He has a particular will for our lives, and this is different for each believer. And that particular will is never inconsistent with the Scriptures. It is logical; almost invariably it is confirmed by brothers and sisters; it is usually consistent with our passions and desires; and it is in the realm of possibility. We are free to pursue our desires, but we must be careful to not equate God's will with our own happiness. And his general will for the church should not be subordinate to pursuing his particular will.

Perhaps "call" is a better word for God's specific will for our lives. Every believer should have a sense of his or her calling, i.e., how God wants us to employ our gifts and talents at work, in church, in our neighborhood. It's important to understand the will of God for our life in terms of our calling. It will help us redeem the time and make choices as to what we should and should not agree to. This is why Jesus could say, "[I have] accomplished the work which You have given Me

to do" (John 17:4).

C. Walking full of the Spirit.

A third area in which Christians are to walk wisely has to do with the controlling influence of life. At this point we may be asking how do we walk wisely, how do we redeem the time, and how do we implement life according to the will of God? Paul's answer is, let us be filled with the Holy Spirit: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18).

The unwise and foolish walk is a life lived under the control of alcohol. In our day this might extend to drugs, prescription medications, and any addiction that controls our behavior. The reason we are not to be controlled by wine is that that leads to reckless living, debauchery and indulgence. When we are controlled by alcohol we do not redeem the time. We do not live according to God's will. We have no power to say no. We have no thought for the consequences of our actions. Reckless living might be rendered as that which one does without being able to think about it, or what one does when the mind is absent. Alcohol is actually a depressant, not a stimulant. It does not stimulate us to walk in the good works which God has planned for us.

In contrast, the wise walk is a life controlled and empowered not by spirits, but by the one Holy Spirit. Sometimes these two influences can be mistaken. This was the case on the day of Pentecost, when people thought the apostles were drunk. In the Old Testament, Eli the priest made the same mistake when he observed Hannah praying.

What does it mean to "be filled with the Spirit?" Notice that the word is a command, not an option. The verb is plural, so it applies to every believer; it is passive, so God is the one who does the filling; and the tense is present, so it assumes continuous, ongoing activity.

One thing it does not mean is receiving a second blessing of the Spirit. The definition of the word, the grammar and the context simply do not support this view. The word implies a filling out, a bringing to completion or fulfillment. Paul is not talking about a new outpouring of the Spirit, but a filling out of the Spirit into every area of life so that believers come to completion. The goal is to be under the control of the Holy Spirit in every area of life. "A Spirit-filled Christian is under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit."²

Paul goes on to define how Christians are to be filled out with the Spirit, listing four areas in which we should see the manifestation of the Spirit. This is observed in the four participial phrases that he employs: "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and [submitting] to one another in the fear of Christ" (Eph 5:19-21). Two of these phrases are directed

to our relationship with God, and two to our relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ.

First, we are to speak to each other "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." This is not a reference to speaking in tongues. The context here is public worship and fellowship. Certainly we are to greet one another with gracious speech. However, Paul has more than this in mind. The idea is mutual exhortation by singing to one another—a practice that is found in many churches around the world.

Second, we are to be filled with the Spirit by a lifestyle of worship. The context here is the same as for fellowship. However, this is directed to God: the Lord is the one we must worship. And we worship him in our hearts, or inner man. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he spoke about worshiping in spirit and truth. True worship is centered on the truth of Jesus, through the Spirit of God who lives in our hearts. Our chief aim is to glorify God, and worship is central to a Spirit-filled life.

Third, the Spirit-filled life is a life filled with gratitude. Notice the qualifiers that Paul uses. We are to be thankful always and for all things, not just when we feel good or when things go our way. Our life is a gift from God. The agent of our gratitude is our Lord Jesus, and the recipient is God the Father. Do gratitude and thanksgiving permeate our lives? If not, then we are not operating under the control of the Spirit. This is not an easy task. It's hard to be thankful for a serious illness, for the loss of a loved one, or the loss of a job. However, gratitude is what keeps us from becoming callous, resentful and bitter.

Listen to these words of Henri Nouwen:

Resentment and gratitude cannot co-exist since, resentment blocks the perception and experience of life as a gift. My resentment tells me that I don't receive what I deserve. It always manifests itself in envy... The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy. Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment.³

God's will is that Christians be thankful always.

Finally, we should submit to one another out of respect for Christ. There is only one Lord. We are all brothers and sisters; there is no top dog. Submitting means that we are always willing to yield, to give way to one another. We are not concerned with who is the greatest. Are you trying to control your life and circumstances? Do you think that dominating people and enforcing your will on others is a sign of strength? If you do, then you are not in God's will. As we relate to others, do we see ourselves as equals, neither superior nor inferior? Are we willing to yield to them and trust the Lord? These are signs of a Spirit-controlled life.

While we have noted that Paul is not referring to a second blessing, we must also ask whether we are afraid to allow the Spirit to control our lives, our church and our worship. In the gospel of John it is hard not to be impressed by the number of verses that relate to the work of the Spirit. Life comes from above, through the Spirit. Without the Spirit, we are merely well-intentioned, well-informed religious people who lack the power to walk wisely. Without the Spirit we will walk just like the Gentiles, for it is the Spirit of God that distinguishes us from unbelievers. We had best make good use of him!

Annie Dillard in *The Writing Life*, says, "There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by. A life of good days lived in the senses is not enough. The life of sensation is the life of greed; it requires more and more. The life of the Spirit requires less and less; time is ample and its passage sweet."

May God through his Spirit give us the grace to walk wisely, according to his will, in both our time and our understanding.

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1. Charles Hummel, *HIS Magazine* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1966).

2. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979), 204.

3. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 85.