

Walk Wisely **Ephesians 5:15-21**

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. – Ephesians 5:15-21, ESV

Introduction: What Does Wisdom Look Like?

What do you think of when you hear the word “wisdom”? Do you think of someone who is really smart? Really old? Maybe with a long beard? Beards are surely a sign of true wisdom, aren’t they? Maybe your picture of wisdom is of a guru on a mountaintop, hanging out in a cave, eating mountain berries and giving cryptic answers to pilgrims who endure the arduous journey to reach them.

Well, here in Ephesians 5, we come to the fifth admonition from Paul regarding how we walk. Having told us to walk worthy of the calling we have received, not to walk as unbelievers do in the futility of their thinking, to walk in love and to walk as children of light – all of which are variations of telling us to live out who we truly are in Christ – Paul now tells us to look carefully or beware carefully how we walk, not as unwise but as wise.

Paul has already hinted that wisdom is essential to living as a Christian, in his negative command from 4:17-18: “*Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.*” But this is the first time he has explicitly told us to walk in wisdom, to walk wisely.

Paul has spoken three times of wisdom, twice of the wisdom of God and once in his first prayer for the Ephesians, asking that God would give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. As we’ll see in today’s passage, Paul’s understanding of wisdom – in keeping with the rest of Scripture – unites heart and mind, affection and understanding, knowledge and life, love and truth. In doing so, Paul challenges our understanding of what wisdom is and how we can attain it and live in it.

I. Redeeming the Time

A. Watch Carefully How You Walk

The very first thing Paul says in today's passage is "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise." Wisdom requires attentiveness. We need to pay careful attention to how we live our lives. We can't just blindly go through life following our hearts, driven by emotions. We have to be more careful than that. We have to think about who we are, what we're doing, why we're doing it, what our cultural context and life situation is.

But one of the dangers of a verse like Ephesians 5:15 is that it is vague enough on its own that we can be tempted to fill it with our own meaning, to import our ideas of careful and wise, instead of letting the context define the terms for us. One key principle of studying the Bible is that if something is unclear or vague, then keep reading and see if what follows can help clarify what you're reading.

In this case, verses 16-21 define what it means to walk wisely and how we can be empowered to do so. So, let's keep going . . .

B. Redeeming the Time for the Days Are Evil

The first way Paul explains walking wisely is "making the best use of the time, because the days are evil." Other translations that are more literal will say "redeeming the time, for the days are evil." The Greek even more literally means "buying the opportunity." It means that we should see the urgency and value of the time we've been given and not waste it.

The reason Paul gives is "because the days are evil." The age we live in is marked by corruption and deception. Evil corrupts what is good and twists the truth into deception.

So, what we get from verse 16 is that walking wisely is a matter of urgency, of seeing the evil of the age in which we live and seizing the time we have as a precious and fleeting opportunity to glorify God and spread His light in the midst of great darkness.

But we must keep reading to find out more specifics about what we are to do to walk wisely with urgency in an evil age.

II. Avoiding Foolishness

The next explanation of wise walking we're given is a contrast between foolishness and understanding the will of the Lord. "Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." At first, this may seem like a restatement of verse 15, "not as unwise but as wise." But there's more to it than that.

A. Foolishness vs. Understanding

By bringing in the word “foolish,” Paul is now explicitly tying unwise behavior with the biblical concept of the fool and foolishness. Two weeks ago, we encountered the word “foolish” in verse 4, when Paul condemned “foolish talk” as out of place for believers. The best place to go to understand what the Bible means by a fool is the Book of Proverbs, which is where we went two weeks ago and where we’ll go now for our definition of foolishness: A fool, according to Proverbs, is one who is careless, who lacks understanding and who despises wisdom.

This reference to foolishness as the opposite of wisdom shows us that Paul is thinking biblically and wants us to think biblically, too. Proverbs is one of several places in the Bible where the “two roads” picture of wisdom vs. foolishness, righteousness vs. wickedness, light vs dark, life vs. death, narrow vs. broad is presented. So many of the Proverbs themselves present this “two roads” understanding in pithy two-line contrasts:

*The wise will inherit honor,
but fools get disgrace. – Proverbs 3:35*

*Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise,
but the companion of fools will suffer harm. – Proverbs 13:20*

*The crown of the wise is their wealth,
but the folly of fools brings folly. – Proverbs 14:24*

*The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly. – Proverbs 15:2*

We can see Paul following this same pattern throughout the “application” part of Ephesians, with his emphasis on putting off the old self and putting on the new, but also specifically here with three main contrasts:

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit

And so, contrasted with the biblical picture of foolishness, is understanding the will of the Lord. In keeping with the Proverbs, understanding here is not primarily an intellectual exercise. Certainly, there are things we need to know, but understanding the will of the Lord is so much

bigger and more life-changing than the accumulation of information; it is about real transformation.

Consider these Proverbs which specifically contrast the fool with the person of understanding:

*Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool,
but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding. – Proverbs 10:23*

*Wisdom rests in the heart of a man of understanding,
but it makes itself known even in the midst of fools. – Proverbs 14:33*

*A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding
than a hundred blows into a fool. -Proverbs 17:10*

As we can see, understanding is about loving wisdom and being humble and teachable. And specifically, in the context of Ephesians, to “understand what the will of the Lord is” is to truly grasp the Gospel and God’s plan for salvation and the kingdom in Christ. It is to understand the grace of God, the transforming, life-giving power of God, and the glory of Christ.

And so, Paul then goes on to develop this foolish-understanding contrast not by highlighting intellectual differences but by contrasting where we get our satisfaction, joy, pleasure and contentment.

B. Drunkenness vs. Being Filled with the Holy Spirit

And so Paul says: “*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.*”

Seeking satisfaction, joy and fulfillment in getting drunk leads only to waste, wanton destruction of value. It is debauchery, excessive waste. This same word is used in its adjective form to describe the lifestyle of the prodigal son when he leaves his father’s house— loose, riotous, wasteful, prodigal living. This is what drunkenness produces.

But now we come to the surprising twist in the passage. Paul has been making contrasts – wise vs. unwise, foolish vs. understanding. So, what would naturally contrast with getting drunk and being wasteful? Well, being sober and frugal, right? Being upright and maybe a little uptight, right? But that’s not what Paul says.

He says, “Be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And this is an interesting contrast because the first time we see people filled with the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost, they are accused of being drunk with wine!

Paul knows that our hearts are made to seek satisfaction and joy somewhere. He knows you can’t just tell people to stop seeking joy and satisfaction. The answer is not just “Stop doing those bad things; they’re wasteful and harmful!” Something has to take their place in our hearts and lives, something bigger, better, more satisfying.

And so the command is *“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.”*

III. Living a Spirit-Filled Life

The rest of this passage, rather than giving a series of commands that follow “be filled with the Holy Spirit” is instead a description of what a life “filled by the Holy Spirit” looks like. And there are four main characteristics that Paul highlights. Before we go through them, let’s not miss the main point: Paul’s command, his exhortation, is that we be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts and filling our lives is the One who gives us the power, strength, joy and satisfaction that is the opposite of drunkenness, that is the life-giving reality of which drunkenness is the cheap, wasteful imitation.

How do we get filled with the Holy Spirit? Jesus said, “If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:13) So, we ask and we seek and we knock, and through the word and through worship, God answers and opens and gives. It may take time and require persistence, but God will not withhold His Holy Spirit from those who desire Him.

And when God fills us with the Holy Spirit, His fruit will manifest itself in four ways . . .

A. Addressing One Another in Song

“addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”

The way we speak to one another will change. This is not talking about singing together in corporate worship, but about personal interactions, about our social dialogue in fellowship with one another. Our conversation will become God-centered and worshipful, with the language of the psalms and of hymns and of spiritual songs.

These three terms describe three different kinds of worship songs: the Psalms are, of course, drawn from the Book of Psalms and perhaps other similar poems of praise from Scripture. Hymns are songs of praise to God and Christ, worship songs. Spiritual songs are worshipful songs dealing with other topics than the direct praise of God or Christ.

So, for example, in today's worship service, we began with a psalm, Psalm 103, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty." We then had a hymn of praise to Christ, "Jesus Paid It All." Then, we had a spiritual song that was a prayer asking God to speak to us through His word. We'll end with another hymn of praise to Christ, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

We'll know we're being filled with the Holy Spirit when the language of the psalms and of praise and of spiritual things spills out overflowing from the service of worship into our conversations afterward.

B. Singing with Your Heart to the Lord

But of course, it's not just in our conversations with one another, but even more importantly, in our hearts to the Lord and on our lips in private praise, that worship songs will be heard.

singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,

What is the regular music of your heart and how does it overflow to your lips? Is it the lament of self-pitying woe that rises up to manifest itself as complaint and bitter grumbling? Is it the nervous, tense music of a horror movie manifesting itself in fear and anxiety? Or is it the sweet melody of praise manifesting itself in joyful singing to the Lord.

Again, this is not a command- "Do this and live!" - but a description of a life filled with the Holy Spirit.

C. Giving Thanks Always and for Everything

Not only will a life filled with the Holy Spirit be marked by singing praises to God, but it will also be marked by "*giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,*"

Two weeks ago, we talked about the importance of giving thanks, as the opposite of depraved speech. Then, we talked about all the things we had to be thankful for. That verse was a command: "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place,

but instead let there be thanksgiving.” God commands us to give thanks, and we can always think of something to be thankful for, right?

But this description of the Spirit-filled life takes thanksgiving to the next level: *giving thanks always and for everything. Always. For Everything.* Paul uses both of these words together to show us the high call of thankfulness. If God is sovereign over every single thing, and if He is always working all things for our good, then we can always give thanks for everything.

If you really think about this, you’ll see that only the Holy Spirit can empower us to do this. But the good news is that He can indeed empower us to do this. This is one of the benefits we receive when He fills us: We overflow not only in praise but in thanksgiving always and for everything!

D. Submitting to One Another

And finally, the Spirit-filled life is marked by “*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” In our flesh, we don’t like the idea of submission. And we have good reason, too, because submission in the flesh is an ugly and abusive thing. When people submit to one another in the flesh, it is a manipulation of power and control and leads to deep scars, painful consequences, to ugly long-term dehumanizing soul-killing domination.

And that’s the complete opposite of Spirit-filled submission, which is “out of reverence for Christ.” We don’t insist on getting our own way. We aren’t seeking our own glory or comfort or convenience. On the other side, we’re not submitting because we think we’re unworthy or we fear the other person.

Sadly, for far too long, submission in the church and in Christian homes has not been marked as Spirit-filled submission out of reverence for Christ. Just as we need the Holy Spirit to fill us in order to give us a heart overflowing with praise and thanksgiving, so we also need the Holy Spirit to fill us to give us the right kind of submission – loving, kind, gentle, Christ-honoring.

But when the Holy Spirit does grant this, it is beautiful. In many ways, it is the most beautiful of all four of these marks of a Spirit-filled life because it is so contrary to our human nature that it most clearly shows the transforming power of grace.

And that’s really what this whole section in Ephesians is describing and calling us to pursue: Not a list of rules or a program of self-help. Ultimately, to walk wisely means to live in the transforming power of grace, filled by the Holy Spirit, understanding the will of the Lord, overflowing with praise and thanksgiving, and lovingly putting others ahead of ourselves.

Such Spirit-filled lives would lead us to form a community so very different from anything the world can offer and would testify so clearly to the truth of the Gospel, to the saving power of Christ, to the glory of God in the church. May God be pleased to grant us His Holy Spirit to fill our hearts toward this end!