

Scripture:

Psalm 34

Ephesians 5:15-20

“Be very careful, then, how you live.”

There’s the story of a young child calling out to his mother in panic.

And when the parents arrive --- they find their young son with his hand stuck in a vase.

“It’s stuck! --- it’s stuck!” ----- the boy calls out in a panic --- “I can’t get my hand out. ---- It’s stuck!”

The parents contemplate smashing the vase to free the child’s hand ---- but that shouldn’t be necessary they think to themselves --- surely we can get young Johnny’s hand out another way without having to lose the vase.

So they get some soap and they lather up all around his hand and wrist.

But to no avail ---- but as they do they notice that his wrist is tight and tense.

“Relax” --- they say --- “Relax and slip your hand out --- you’re all tense and tight --- you’ll never free yourself that way --- relax your muscles.”

So they pull and the child turns and winces in pain --- and they pull again --- - but again he winces ----- “It’s no use!” ----- the boy says --- “It’s no use!”

But again the father calmly says --- “Son --- you have to relax your hand --- if you’re tense it will never come out --- relax.”

“I’m not tense dad really I’m not --- I’m just hanging on.” --- the young boy replies.

“Hanging on --- to what.” ----- the dad says.

“To my coin” --- the child says --- “My coin fell into the vase and when I reached in to get it my hand got stuck.”

“Well then let go of the coin --- loosen your grip ---- and your hand will slip out easily.” ----- the mother finally says.

But the boy is reluctant ---- he wants his money --- and thinks he’ll lose it if he lets go.

Finally he does let go ----- and after a minor struggle with an open hand and relaxed wrist --- his hand slides out freely --- and shortly thereafter the coin is shaken lose and falls out.

Crisis over --- at least for now.

So what does this have to do with today --- and our scripture reading from Ephesians?

Unlike most of the other letters the apostle Paul wrote in the New Testament --- Ephesians isn’t about a particular situation or challenge.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians he wasn’t addressing a specific need or challenge that the community was facing.

Instead Ephesians is all about new life in Christ --- and what new life in Christ looks like ----- and asks of us.

And the few short verses that we have before us today consider some of the changes we need to make in our personal life in order to be more faithful and Christ like.

The boy with his hand caught in the vase needed to let go of an old way of thinking in order to free himself.

In order to be true and faithful and live into the way of our Lord Jesus Christ we too have to change the way we approach things ---- we have to look at things differently --- in light of Christ.

“Be very careful, then, how you live.” --- is how Paul opens up this section of Ephesians.

Life in Christ involves care.

We have to be careful --- very careful even ----- according to Paul.

We have to be disciplined --- intentional --- discerning.

“Be very careful, then, how you live --- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.

Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.

Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

5 short verses packed with wisdom.

Be careful then how you live ---- live wisely is the first piece.

In essence the whole of these verses has to do with living wisely in the complicated world of human relationships.

“Living wisely in the complicated world of human relationships.”

So of course the question is --- “what does it mean to live wisely?”

And the answer is very simple ---- “To live wisely means to live in accordance with God’s will.”

Or --- even more simply put --- to live wisely means to do as Christ would have you do.

That to me is wisdom in its purest form --- “to live as Christ would have me live.”

And then of course Paul fleshes this out a bit in the next few verses.

To live wisely ---- to live as Christ would have us live ---- is to make the most of every opportunity --- to seize the moment --- to seize the opportunities in life as they present themselves to us.

Does anyone remember that feeling when you're looking for a new place to live?

You're very attentive to the market right ---- looking for that right house or right apartment or right Condo to come on the market and when it does --- you don't waste any time at going and taking a look at it ---- and if it's what you want and thought it was ----- you make an offer --- it's game on right.

Similarly when a business person is seeking new opportunities for their business they're always scanning wherever they go ---- whomever they meet --- looking to seize the opportunity to make a sale or purchase or business arrangement.

If you're in the market for a used car --- you know the make model ---- perhaps even year --- or at least rough number of kilometers ----- you're forever on the look out for one to come on the market at the right price.

You're attentive ----- eager to seize the opportunity --- and buy the house ---- ----- make the deal ----- find the car.

That's the kind of attentiveness Paul describes that we as Christians ought to have ---- "making the most of every opportunity".

Seizing the moment --- sharing Christ --- acting Christ like ----- living out the gospel --- wherever and whenever the opportunity arises.

When a tragedy happens ---- earthquake --- tornado etc. ----- Christians are almost always the first to respond ---- that's part of what Paul means in seizing the opportunity --- or making the most of every opportunity --- being prepared.

Closer to home ---- seizing the opportunity might look something more like this.

You're talking with a friend or co-worker and they share with you a situation or problem they are facing.

And your response is to say something like ---

“That’s a tough one --- when I have to make tough decisions I usually talk with people from my church --- they always seem to have good counsel --- invariably someone else has had to deal with much the same kind of thing and is able to help me out a bit.”

----- or -----

“When I have to work through something like that I often seek help from one of the leaders in my church --- an elder or pastor ----- asking them to point me to similar situations in the Bible to see how people handled it there --- sometimes the Bible shows me what to do and sometimes the Bible gives examples of what not to do --- but I always find it helpful one way or the other.”

Making the most of every opportunity means being attentive --- alive ---- and open in life ----- and not just comatose ---- dead to life --- half asleep -- ---- or closed off thinking we know best.

Live wisely --- live like Jesus did ----- make the most of every opportunity -- -- and then --- understand the Lord’s will.

Understand the Lord’s will.

Understand that God is working in and through the world to fulfill his wishes and desires and that part of the job --- part of the responsibility of the Christian ----- is to give our energy over to the work and witness and ministry that God is already doing.

We don’t have to invent new ways of building the kingdom of God --- instead we have to give ourselves over to the ways God is already building His kingdom.

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”

Paul is often speaking in opposites here --- don’t be this --- instead be that.

Don’t be unwise --- be wise --- don’t be foolish ---- instead understand God’s will.

God’s will is that we will live in harmony with one another.

That the lion lay down with the lamb --- that the stronger help the weaker ---
- that the so called some bodies help the so called no bodies.

That our personal agenda's will be replaced with God's agenda.

And God's agenda includes that everyone will live in peace and harmony
together as brothers and sisters in Christ --- as one family of God.

And there is only way for this to happen ----- through the knowledge of
Christ --- through a personal and communal relationship with the risen One.

The only way we can every truly understand God's will is through
relationship with Jesus Christ.

To understand God's will is to understand that Christ is needed --- by
everyone.

Living wisely and making the most of every opportunity --- and
understanding God's will ---- all come together in knowing and sharing
Jesus Christ ---- in walking with Christ together.

And people often say that's great --- but how exactly --- how precisely do I
share Jesus.

Well guess what there isn't a chapter or book in the Bible called --- 4000
ways to share Jesus --- there isn't a list you can simply turn to --- we have to
work this out with God and figure it out together carefully.

And although there isn't a list ---- there are chapter after chapter of examples
---- look at how Jesus interacted with others --- and go and do likewise.

He humbly met them and talked with them --- walked with them on the road
of life --- built relationships and trust --- and spoke the truth in love.

And for today --- live as Paul is instructing in these 5 verses.

And the next piece of advice is very straightforward ----- don't do things
excessively ---- like drink excessively.

Don't do things excessively.

At that time there were a number of other "religions" ----- or spiritualities in and around Ephesus that spoke of drinking and drinking and drinking spirits ----- alcohol ----- until one was all caught up in a state of euphoria --- filled with a spirit.

Kind of sounds like getting drunk doesn't it.

And apparently these places were filling up with all kinds of people --- go to that "holy" place and drink your fill --- and you'll have a heck of a time ----- -- you'll have what they are calling a spiritual experience.

We still have places like this around --- they're called bars --- people go and drink their fill and think they have some kind of spiritual experience.

And then imagine if the drink they were consuming was provided for free of charge ----- that would become popular --- quickly --- especially among young people who may not know any better --- and that's precisely what was happening --- people were drinking themselves into a frenzy and calling it a spiritual experience.

So Paul comes along and says these places have it all wrong ----- don't live excessively --- don't get all filled up on things that this world has to offer --- booze or otherwise ----- money --- material things --- don't get all filled up on things that this world has to offer.

Instead --- Paul says ----- be filled with the Spirit of God.

Verse 18 --- "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

And he then goes on to say in that same verse ----- "be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit."

Don't get yourself all filled up with junk of this world ----- booze --- money - -- material things --- instead get fill up on God ----- the Spirit of God.

And then turn and speak to one another harmoniously ----- or to use his exact words ----- with psalms --- hymns ----- and songs from the Spirit.

God wants harmony for us --- fellowship --- care and compassion for one another instead of antagonism --- competition ---- and greed.

God's wants us to build each other up in love --- instead of stomping and cutting each other down.

Christ brought people together in harmony ----- and not just temporary harmony --- like you might experience if you are all filled up --- drunk on wine ----- but a lasting eternally harmony --- a harmony of the Spirit.

That's what Paul is talking about here ----- a lasting ---- eternal harmony.

Living wisely --- making the most of opportunities --- understanding and living into God's will --- not living in the excesses of worldly things --- brings a profound joy and lasting harmony.

So much so that it manifests itself in song ---- in melodic harmonic living that is shared with others.

Verse 19 says --- "speaking to one another in with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit."

Notice these aren't psalms --- hymns and songs directed towards God --- divine worship --- that comes in the next verse.

Here Paul is talking about harmony --- directed towards each other.

It's a beautiful thing to hear people say beautiful --- nice things to each other.

And it's very unpleasant to hear people say unpleasant things to each other too.

When Paul says be very careful how you live --- speaking to one another with psalms --- hymns and songs of the Spirit ----- part of what he's saying is be careful how you speak to one another.

And picking up on another theme in Ephesians in general ---- build each other up ---- build each other up in love.

If you've ever heard someone tear someone down --- either explicitly or even more subtly --- passive aggressively ----- then you know how sad and unfortunate and damaging it can be.

At the same time --- if you've ever heard someone build up another person -- --- you know how beautiful and powerful and uplifting it can be.

Be careful --- be very careful ----- Paul says --- how you live ----- speak to one another harmoniously --- poetically ---- from the Spirit of God.

If you want to know how to share Christ ---- here's a very powerful way ----- --- speak to others harmoniously --- poetically --- from the Spirit of God ---- and before long ---- people will very quickly notice that there is something different about you and they will be drawn to you ----- wanting to know what it is that is so different about your way.

And then finally ----- it's give praise to the Lord.

Thank God for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Life in Christ --- life in the gospel means letting go of old ways of doing things ----- freeing yourself from old ways --- making changes -----
 ---- living like Christ
 ----- making the most of opportunities
 --- understanding God's will
 ---- not living on the excesses of the world
 ----- learning how to genuinely get along and live in harmony with others

And now the last one ---- giving thanks to God in the name of Jesus Christ.

These things ---- living wisely -
 ----- making the most of opportunities
 --- understanding God's will
 ---- avoiding the excesses of the world
 ----- living in harmony with others

Can only truly happen on account of Christ.

Where these things transpire ----- there also is Jesus Christ.

Where there is Jesus Christ ----- there are also all of these things.

Be very careful, then, how you live.

Means live as Christ lived.

And in our modern technology saturated world --- there are a few nuances we need to pay attention to.

Be careful how you live means ----- watch what you watch.

Be careful about what you put before your eyes.

I've been fooled a few times on this one --- I see a caption or image or phrase on the computer --- a blog or a Facebook post ---- and I go there only to find myself reading or looking at something that not only doesn't build me or Christ up in any way but actually tears down and erodes away the human spirit.

My new general rule is ---- "Would I watch this or say this or read this ----- if my wife and kids were here with me?" ----- if the answer is no ----- I close it out --- and stop watching or reading.

We live in an age of information like never before and we have to be careful what we expose ourselves to ---- the young female singer Jewel sang in her debut album --- "I'm sensitive and I want to stay that way." ---- sometimes it can be helpful to think this way --- "I'm sensitive and I want to stay that way."

Be very careful then how you live applies to every aspect of our lives --- what we read --- what we watch ---- what we listen to --- and even what we think about --- desire ----- and long for.

If we're like the little boy who forever clutches on to the coin then we will never free ourselves from holding on to that which matters little.

Instead we'll remain trapped --- limited --- clutching for and holding on to the wrong things in life.

Life in Christ ---- as Paul rightly says ---- means we have to live differently - ---- live carefully ---- very carefully.

Seeking wisdom --- right living ---- Christ like living.

Living in Christ means letting go of the excesses of the world --- and living into Biblical ---- gospel ways ---- that include finding harmony with others and building each other up.

“Be very careful, then, how you live.” ---- isn't about beating ourselves down or limiting ourselves ----- it's about letting go --- and freeing ourselves ----- finding joy ---- and peace and harmony ---- thanks to the will of God in Jesus Christ.

When we feel trapped or limited or caught up in the wrong pursuit or focus - ---it's like our hand is caught in the jar holding on to the wrong things in life.

We are all --- in varying degrees --- and from time to time ---- like the young boy --- hand caught in a vase as we clutch and hold onto the wrong things in life.

And like the boy.

We can try to smash our way free ---- or we can try the subtly greasy approach ---- hoping things will slide off into a better place without too much effort if we simply add a bit of this here and a bit of that there without ever really changing our approach.

Or we can let go completely of that which got us into the predicament in the first place ----- and try a whole new approach.

The choice is ours.

Once again God's words ----

“Be very careful, then, how you live --- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.
Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.
Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms,
hymns, and songs from the Spirit.
Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to
God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Lord give us hearts of care.

Help us to be discerning --- and loving and gracious --- seizing opportunities
---- forever grateful.

Amen.