

SCRIPTURE FOCUS	Ephesians 5:15-21	DATE	11.10.19
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LESSON SUMMARY	As children of light, Christians should consider carefully how they live their lives. This includes structuring our lives in such a way that we use all our moments to glorify God. We should also seek purposefully to be filled with the Spirit.		

all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted

ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

¹⁵Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

In the previous section, Paul moved from avoiding specific vices to speaking in generalities about darkness and light. Christians, he said, are light in the Lord and should therefore live as children of light. As children of light, they should have nothing to do with deeds of darkness and even expose them. In this new section, Paul continues that more general thought, as if to say, “As children of light, consider carefully how to live – not as unwise but as wise.” This is an interesting way for Paul to speak because the Christian life is not marked here by morality or spirituality, though those are of course are important. Here, the focus is on wisdom. Christians, Paul says, live well when they walk in wisdom.

In one sense, this emphasis on wisdom shouldn’t surprise us too much. After all, the OT has much to say on the topic (see Proverbs, for instance). In another sense, it is important for us to draw out the importance of wisdom in the Christian life because wisdom is a virtue that we sometimes fail to celebrate enough. As we have walked through Ephesians, we have seen that Gentile Christians come from a place of ignorance and hardness toward God (4:17-19). Upon receiving Christ, they are brought into a new space in which they are to allow their minds to be renewed (4:23). This renewal replaces the “God-vacuum” that once existed in their minds with a God consciousness that allows them to live well in relationship to God. If we link 5:15 to these earlier insights, we find that wisdom is a facet of the renewed mind that Christians are to pursue purposefully.

So, what does it mean to live in wisdom? This passage gives us two views into the topic. First, being wise entails “making the most of every opportunity.” Second, being wise means “understand[ing] what the Lord’s will is.” Regarding making the most of every opportunity, Paul is speaking here of using our time well (see ESV and NASB for this focus on time rather than opportunity). Does this mean that Christians should be anxious perfectionists who count every second? No, it means instead that Christians view every moment as an opportunity to glorify God. Thus the Apostle Paul can say to the Corinthian congregation, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). The “whatever you do” part of that formula includes work, worship, rest, family, recreation, and all the rest of life. A question to ask, then, is how we Christians can structure our lives in manners that are pleasing to the Lord. When we begin to structure our time around glorifying God, we seek to understand the Lord’s will, both generally and specifically, and put it into practice day in and day out. In this light, making the most of time and understanding what the Lord’s will is are complementary activities.

¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

From talk of being foolish and wise, Paul now addresses the specific vice of drunkenness. In Paul's mind, it seems, drunkenness is attached to a foolish life. This idea is underscored when he says drunkenness "leads to debauchery." The Greek word for "debauchery" here has overtones of waste, which is the opposite of making the most of time. Snodgrass explains the use of this term like this: "Drunkenness is symbolic of the height of folly, the loss of direction, and the waste of a life without God."¹ If we want to make the most of our time as Christians, drunkenness is a surefire way to miss that mark, as it causes a loss of control and wasted moments.

Rather than being drunk on wine, the Ephesians are to be filled with the Spirit. Paul has already prayed for something similar in 3:19, where he asked that the Ephesians "may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." In that passage, the filling was a gift to be granted. Here in ch 5, it is a lifestyle to be pursued. Importantly, the Ephesians are to "be filled" rather than filling themselves with Spirit. Spirit-filling, then, is still a gift from outside the believer, but Paul's usage here points to the idea that God is not stingy with his gift. Instead, it is possible to purposefully pursue a lifestyle of being filled with the Spirit because this is how God wants his people to live. Bring Spirit-filled, then, can be seen as part of the "normal Christian life."²

That said, we now need to get specific about what it means to be filled with the Spirit. In the book of Acts, being Spirit-filled means being empowered for witness in some way. Thus, Peter was filled with the Spirit during his Pentecost sermon, and the believers were filled with the Spirit in Acts 4, which made them able to witness boldly in a time of adversity. Paul would surely be glad for Christians to function with this kind of Spirit-filled empowerment all the time, but I don't think that is what he is getting at here. Instead, I think that he is looking to something more in line with Romans 8:1-17. There, the Spirit makes believers able to please God and testifies within them that they are God's children. This is a quieter kind of filling, but it is no less important. We can actually look at these different types of Spirit filling as complementary. The kind we see in Acts empowers Christians for special works in certain moments. The kind that I argue we see here is a continual empowering for life and relationship to God. That this second kind of filling is Paul's point here is supported by the fact that this passage is dealing with living as wise people and understanding the Lord's will.

So, how is it that believers can be filled by the Spirit, and what does that look like in practice? Vv19-21 answers one of those questions. To understand why, it will be helpful to see a translation that is closer to the original Greek. That would look something like this:

...but be filled with the Spirit

- speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit
- singing and praising the Lord in your hearts
- giving thanks at all times for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father

¹ Snodgrass, 289.

² This phrase from Watchman Nee's book of the same name.

- submitting to one another in fear of Christ

When we see the text like this, it becomes apparent that speaking, singing, giving thanks, and submitting are all attached to being filled with the Spirit. For some scholars, these activities are *the result* of being filled with the Spirit.³ For others, they are *the means* of being filled by the Spirit.⁴ Ultimately, either interpretation is fair. For my part, I lean toward the latter interpretation. I do so because I think that these activities bring us into agreement with the work of God in our lives. Speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit means that we are reminding one another of the truths of the gospel through song, probably as we gather together in worship. Singing and praising the Lord in our hearts means that we take that attitude of praise home with us throughout the week. Giving thanks for everything means that we are viewing the world through a lens that can see God at work in everything – even the junky things that he doesn't approve of (see Rom 5:1-5, 8:28-30; James 1:2-4). Submitting to one another means that we are taking Christ's command to love one another seriously (see John 13:1-17, 34-35). In all of these things, we are bringing our lives into agreement with God, which means that we are ready to be filled with the Spirit. I would then argue that the result of being filled is a life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (these are the fruit of the Spirit in our lives according to Gal 5:22-23; see also Eph 4:9 where the fruit of the light is goodness, righteousness, and truth). When we are filled with the Spirit, we live well!

TEACH THE TEXT

In teaching this text, I would focus on wise living, drunkenness, and being filled with the Spirit.

WISE LIVING

I knew a guy in college who assumed that the Spirit would direct every moment of his life. Thus, one day he prayed about whether he should go to Wendy's with us for lunch. This was a strange moment for the rest of us, as he actually turned his back to us in prayer before agreeing to come. While the Bible does talk about being led by the Spirit in specific situations, we've also seen that having our minds renewed enables us to live wisely before God. To be wise means that we seek and follow the Spirit's direction when we sense it *and know what God's will is the rest of the time*. Sometimes this knowing has to do with specifics. Sometimes it is more general. In this passage, we see a general call to structure our lives wisely in ways that will please the Lord. This is accomplished as we live on purpose in light of the Spirit. Great questions for your group will be what it means to make the most of our time and how we become wise to know God's will.

DRUNKENNESS

We're Baptists, which means that we have views on alcohol. For many in the older generation, t-totaling is the only way to go. For many in the younger generation, drinking is okay. When we approach the scriptures, we find that drinking itself is not condemned. Drunkenness, however, is condemned categorically. As we approach the issue of drinking, it is important to keep our attention where Paul puts it – on drunkenness. Ultimately, both of the views on alcohol mentioned above can respect what Paul has to say about not being

³ Sondgrass takes this stance.

⁴ Clinton takes this stance.

drunk on wine. For my part, I am a t-totaler who has never seen much use in alcohol. I have good Christian friends, though, who hold a different view point. In the end, we can all agree that drunkenness is wrong and that we are all responsible for what we put in our bodies.

BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

As Baptists, we're not always sure what to do with the Holy Spirit. I suspect this is in large part due to the stories we hear from our charismatic brothers and sisters who describe instances of being Spirit-filled that involve a loss of control. To be filled with the Spirit, it seems, is dramatic and sometimes seems a little crazy. As we have moved through Ephesians we have seen a different push. Rather than chasing dramatic experiences of the Spirit, Paul is calling us to wise living that the Spirit enables. This is a view of the Spirit that we Baptists can celebrate and embrace. To be filled with the Spirit is to know deeply that we are God's children, to be able to discern God's will, and to have the fruit of righteousness, goodness, and truth show up in our lives.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Vv 15-16

1. What do you think it means to walk as wise people? How does this play out in real life?
2. What does Paul mean when he calls us to make the most of our time?
3. How might we structure our lives around glorifying God? Where do rest and recreation fit in this picture?
4. What things might we Americans give up for the sake of making better use of our time?
5. What does it mean that the days are evil? How does this reality affect Christians?

Vv 17-21

1. Why do you think Paul is suddenly talking about drunkenness? What is his view on it?
2. Why is drunkenness not befitting of God's people?
3. How should Christians approach alcohol?
4. How do you understand the Holy Spirit's work in our lives?
5. What do you think it means to be filled with the Spirit?
6. What are the results of being filled by the Spirit?
7. How are the activities in vv 19-20 connected to being filled with the Spirit?
8. Practically speaking, why are these activities good?

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