

How to Become Wise in Three Simple Lessons

Sunday, August 15, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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Ephesians 5:15-21

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but 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, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

In just three brief and easy lessons I can tell you how to become wise! No, you will not be able to guess the stock market's future and make lots of money, nor will you be able to suddenly solve the world's problems, nor even most of your own persistent life struggles—but you can become wise! We are quick to long for worldly wisdom which we think can take the difficulties and bruises out of life, but the wisdom which Paul gives us in the Ephesian letter is much better than worldly wisdom. Paul first urges us to be wise—*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise*—and he would not want to give us a command that we were unable to keep. What follows is simple, brief and powerful insight into the attaining of wisdom. Let us read, consider, and become wise.

The first lesson may sound the most complicated. *Make the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* Many remember this verse from the Old King James Version reading: *redeeming the time, for the days are evil.* This has a very poetic and beautiful sound, but how does one redeem time, and how are we to know God's will? This doesn't sound very simple, but look again. *Redeem* is a rich term with many meanings. What Paul means here is the time is to be reclaimed and restored. We dare not waste time, but must do all we can to use it fully as the gift from God that it is. The remark that *the days are evil* is indeed mysterious, but not beyond understanding. As the days go by the world continues on its own godless, God-defying, or simply God-ignoring way. We must not drift along with the world and let the *status quo* have its way, but must seize every opportunity to do God's will and bring in the Kingdom.

We modern people have our own way of redeeming time, but it has mostly to do with efficiency. We cringe at the thought of wasting time and doing nothing, and are ever focused upon cramming our days full of activity. Efficiency is a wonderful thing, but we moderns need to see the limits of this mad dash to accomplish more and more work in less and less time. Wasting time does not please God, but neither does our hyper-activity! The same Bible that tells us to *redeem the time*, and has many verses which tell us to be industrious also tells us to take a day off and to be sure to rest as we need to rest. We modern people would be shocked if we could go back to Old Testament times and experience the *numerous* rest days and special festivals which God commanded. By our way of thinking this would be a terrible waste of time! God wants us to make the best of the time, and that does not mean endless work and ultimate efficiency. Let us not waste time, and let us not see filling our time with activity as the highest good. So what then should we do with our time? The next verse gives us the needed direction. *So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* Let us dedicate our time to doing God's will.

Again Paul's initial step toward wisdom is sounding very complicated, for how are we to know the will of God? As we first hear this command, we may think in terms of knowing God's plans for our future and all sorts of high and unreachable mysteries. Here, when Paul speaks of God's will he is simply reminding us to be about the daily activities of being a follower of Christ. How are we to live like loving and merciful Christians? What have we been taught since our youth, and what are we learning these days in Sunday school and worship time? Let us be active in the *doing* of God's will as it has, and continues to be revealed to us.

But let me not make this sound too simple or easy. This opening lesson on wisdom strikes upon a familiar and challenging tension in our lives. We know God's desires for our lives and long to do God's will, but we also have many tasks and expectations which the world places upon us. We need to work for a living, pay the bills, mow the lawn and a host of other things, yet we dare not let these tasks take over our whole life. We must also take time to worship, support God's people, give, study God's word and pray. How shall we meet the world's obligations and the Lord's as well? We also know that on a regular basis the world's expectations win, and time spent in worship, service, and Kingdom work is often shortchanged.

This precious hour of devotion is such an important time for us to do the most important work of all, worship, and to be reminded what is truly important in life. How we need the weekly reminder! There will always be that tension between the world's obligations and the call of the Kingdom, but with an active life of worship and devotion we are best able to keep our walk with God on track! Having just come through a family crisis I am reminded how such stressful moments can remind us what is important in life—people, eternity and the Gospel of Jesus Christ! Presently our nation is experiencing a shortage of workers, and there are a number of apparent causes of this shortage. I am convinced that one reason that our work force seems to

have shrunk is that many workers have had time away from work due to the COVID crisis with its work shutdowns, and have since come to realize that the time spent with family is more important than the money earned at work!

It is frustrating to have so many things to do in this life and so little time to do them. In our search to find ways to get more done in this life many of us have turned to books and lectures on time management and efficiency. If you haven't yet tried this pursuit I can save you a lot of money and energy by telling you the lesson that all such studies ultimately put forth. Yes, there is something to be gained by efficient use of our time. There are always new tasks which we can learn to accomplish while we brush our teeth. But such helpful time savings are limited. What all the time management experts agree upon is the need to first decide what is truly important in our lives, and then to do those first things first. Yes, this means that many things we would like to see accomplished may not happen, and that may feel sad, but the real tragedy is to come to the end of one's life only to realize that they have not been able to accomplish the tasks of first importance. Consider your calendar and schedule and how you spend your time. Look at your checkbook and finances. How do you spend your money? You cannot accomplish all your life goals and desires, but be sure to accomplish the ones of most importance, and if you are a believer, Christ and Christ's Church are at the top of that list. This is the first step to wisdom.

The next step toward wisdom is the life of sobriety. *Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.* As we hear this command for the first time, we are tempted to become proud and feel confident that we have fulfilled this order. Heavens! We are not alcoholics, and we know better than to engage in such foolishness! The part about being filled with the Spirit may make us uneasy but we do know that God's Spirit is inside us somewhere. But Paul's call to sobriety deserves a deeper look and there is much for even the life-long teetotaler to learn!

Consider for a moment the meaning of drunkenness. Heavy drinking is a means of escape. It is an attempt to withdrawal into one's own world with no care for others, and to seek pleasure only for oneself. All of us, regardless of our relationship to alcohol, have been guilty of a self-indulgent attitude. Paul does more than warn us against drunkenness. He commands us to be filled with the Holy Spirit which turns our hearts and minds outward. The Spirit moves us to praise! He elaborates on the work of the Spirit: *as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.* A worldly spirit turns us toward self and death, but the life-giving Spirit of God leads us to look out, to look up and to praise God. Not only should our praises be directed to God, but we are to do so along with others so that their spirits might be lifted and made joyful. These songs of praise are also meant to be kept in our hearts. While we may be called to look outside and beyond ourselves, and to invest our energies in praise, this joyful energy finds its way back into our own lives and we then experience the deepest of joys.

The end result of this is a grateful heart. Paul continues, *giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Yes, this is a difficult command, for there are many things in this life which do not lend themselves to joy. First let it be said that the Bible is not expecting us to smile at every tragedy, for the scriptures are loaded with laments and expressions of grief, disappointment, and anger. What we are to do is to walk in faith by God's power and trust that all things work together in God's plan. God wants us to have a thankful heart, and a common response to this is the complaint that, "I would be thankful if there were more blessings in my life for which to be thankful." Time does not allow me to go deeper on this matter, but I will leave you with a challenge. Think of the most grateful person that you know. Is this person one who has led a charmed life? One might expect that the most grateful persons would be the ones with the fewest problems, but this is seldom true! The most grateful and joyful people that we know are usually folks who have known tremendous problems throughout their earthly walk, but they have come to see God's gracious hand in their life and decided to be thankful and joyous. Remember this thankful person and pray that God will make you more like them.

This advancement toward wisdom begins with a wise and focused use of our time and seeking first the Kingdom of God. We also become wise by putting off selfishness desire and seeking to be filled with God's Spirit and thus being filled with praise and thanks. The final step in this walk toward wisdom is the most radical, but lessons one and two should have us prepared for this leap of faith. *Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ*. Not only are we to live lives of servanthood, but this servanthood must be toward all people! One might ask, "Why, for heaven's sake, would I want to do this?" This call to servanthood is completely counter-intuitive. The world tells us we should seek to have others serve us, and this drive toward power is a real temptation. Why, for heaven's sake, would we want to become servants? The question answers itself. We do it for the sake of heaven and the Lord of Heaven, Jesus Christ, who humbled Himself, came to earth, and became subject to us, even subject to a death on a cross! As Paul says, we do so, *out of reverence for Christ*. Paul's choice of the word *reverence* makes me a little uncomfortable as the word has a certain stiffness to it by our understanding. The words reverence and respect often imply the kind honor that we might show to a certain leader, only because we are told that we must and because they are in charge. But this *reverence for Christ* should be based upon the heartfelt amazement and joy that the Son of God would subject Himself to death for us! There should be nothing stiff and superficial about this!

The call to radical servanthood is very difficult for us to embrace because it runs directly against our most basic natural desire for power and control. I have found it humorous over the years to hear great debates over the meaning of the words which follow this Epistle lesson. Having introduced this command to be subject to one another, Paul goes on to apply this teaching to various relationships in life, beginning

with husbands and wives. Paul tells wives to be subject to their husbands and then commands husbands to love their wives. He tells the believers how to live out Jesus' self-sacrificing love in marriage in a way which could be understood and applied to that age's understanding of marriage. From the very beginning Paul makes it clear that we are *all* to be subject to one another out of love for Christ. What is so amusing is the way that these verses have been debated over the centuries to see who really gets the last word in marriage! It is so hard to put our striving aside and to hear the radical command of God.

The path of real wisdom is the path of servanthood. Jesus was known as "The Man for Others," and as Christ served, so must I desire to live and serve. As I often say, the highest rank in the Lord's army is that of servant! This is truly a mystery, but we have all experienced this mystery. Years ago, it was pointed out that the secret to joy is to see the important acronym which that word creates: **J**esus, **O**thers, **Y**ourself. As we make this the priority of our life's focus, we will experience the deepest joy. Jesus first, others next, and then your own needs and wants. Ask someone what their greatest joy and accomplishment in this life has been and they will probably tell you something like, raising my children, serving the community through my Church, my time spent serving.

Wisdom can be attained in three simple steps. Redeem the time with a God focused life, be filled with the Spirit of God, and be subject to others. Following this counsel *will* make you wise, and I stand by that promise. Perhaps you still doubt. You may be asking, "What's the catch?" I suppose that I should confess that there are two remaining items of concern. First, though these lessons may be simple concepts, they are not easy. We need God's help, but God delights to empower us by the Spirit. Finally, it should be said that though these simple lessons will lead you to a deep and wonderful wisdom, the world will not recognize you as wise. In fact, they may take you for a complete fool! Don't let the world's ignorance take you off of your game, for these words shall truly make you wise!