

Ephesians 5v15-21

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In this section of Ephesians, Paul explains more about what the lives of children of light should look like. Earlier in the chapter, he's explained to them that certain attitudes and behaviour are inappropriate for them. "But among you, there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (v3). For God's people, who are to be holy, these kinds of things are improper (holiness means being set apart for God – kept separate and special for him). Immorality and impurity don't fit with their identity as God's people.

And it's a serious thing, because people like that have no inheritance in the kingdom of God; it's not just that it gets on God's nerves! **Bottom line** – these people are **idolaters**. Things like sexual immorality and greed take something made by God and turn it into the main thing. By definition, that means God takes second place (or maybe even lower). And that is the definition of idolatry, isn't it? This kind of behaviour **shows what they think about God** - they love other things instead. And there will be no idolaters in the kingdom of God. So keep away from them, Paul says.

The Ephesian Christians are to be different. In verse 8, Paul reminds them why. "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." It's pretty clear that one of the reasons Paul wrote Ephesians was to point out just how much they'd changed – it comes all through the letter. Chapter two is one of my favourite parts of the Bible, because Paul explains how the gospel has turned their lives upside-down.

He couldn't really put the contrast any more strongly than this, could he? They've gone **from darkness to light**. They've gone from being opposed to God and living for themselves, to being God's holy people. And so he reminds them to **live like it**. If they live like it, then they'll produce the kind of fruit God is after, and they'll also show up the fruitlessness of living in the dark.

In the section we read together, he fleshes out more of what it means to live as children of light. And the key is **wisdom**. In these few verses, he gives four ways this wisdom will affect their lives:

1. *Live wisely.*
2. *'Drink' wisely.*
3. *Speak wisely.*
4. *Relate to each other wisely.*

Live Wisely

"Be careful, then, how you live – not as unwise, but as wise..." (v15). *Given what I've just said, watch how you live. Don't be unwise, **be wise**.*

That immediately begs the question – what does living wisely look like? How do you know if you're living wisely? People's opinions about what constitutes wise living can vary a lot, can't they? Well Paul tells them what this looks like. He tells them what the essence of living wisely is: "Making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (v16). Which doesn't sound much clearer does it? Opportunities for what? And what days is he talking about, and why are they so evil?

John Calvin has a helpful translation of this; he puts it as “*redeeming the time...*” The English Standard version (which I generally prefer) puts it as “*make the best use of the time.*” Do you start to see what Paul is getting at? Be wise by making the best possible use of your time.

And in verse 17, he tells them what that means. “Do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.” Making the best use of your time means understanding what God’s will is and doing it. If we are to live wisely, as God’s people, then we need to use our time in the way God wants. Anything else is foolishness.

In the NIV, it’s easy to read this and immediately think it’s about evangelism – we pray for “opportunities”, don’t we? (If we don’t, then we should!) And I think evangelism is definitely part of this. But it’s bigger than that. And it’s bigger than just 'ministry' or the stuff we do on Sunday mornings.

What Paul is getting at, the kind of wise living he’s talking about, is a way of life which at every point asks, “*how can I best use this time to do God’s will?*”

People can get pretty uptight about answering questions like this, and about guidance generally. I’ve met quite a few people who get wound up trying to work out what God might be saying, and they get terribly worried when events don’t line up to point out the answer, or when there’s no prophecy telling them what to do.

It’d be easy to take the mickey, but their concern isn’t a bad thing - if you read chapter 5, **this is a serious business!** But Paul explains to them – and to us – how we make sure we’re living like this. We need to **understand what the Lord’s will is.** Paul clearly expects them to be able to understand it – it isn’t some hidden knowledge that we have to work out by trial and error. **God has told us what His will is in His word!** We don’t have to spend our time looking for signs or waiting for feelings to well up, because He’s revealed his will to us. We avoid being foolish by trying to understand it and putting it into practise.

So telling people about Jesus clearly fits within that, doesn’t it? God wants people to know who Jesus is, and what he’s done for us. So when we’re talking to friends, we need to be asking, “*how can I redeem this time with my friend, and use it for God?*”

But it has other implications doesn’t it – too many for me to list here. This is one of those ‘**dynamite**’ questions, isn’t it? One fairly harmless-looking question which could have a massive impact in our lives if we use it properly. When we’re at work, “*how can I redeem this time?*” When we’re shopping, “*how can I redeem this time?*” When we’re watching TV, or reading, “*how can I redeem this time?*” This will apply to our whole lives! And it will also mean that we have to put in the effort to understand what God’s will is...

This doesn’t just happen by accident. That’s why Paul adds, “because the days are evil” (v16). There are a million other ways of living. They may seem perfectly acceptable, but **if they aren’t God’s will, then they are foolish.** So be careful, Paul says. Be careful that all this other stuff doesn’t lead you astray. You don’t just drift into living wisely – it isn’t our default setting. So be careful, because the days are evil.

Paul goes on to give an example, a way of putting this into practice...

“Drink” Wisely

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery” (v18). This isn’t just a random comment about abstinence! I guess this is a sentence which is used to support the idea that Christians shouldn’t drink – and it’s certainly a warning against excessive drinking. But why does Paul mention it here? It hasn’t just suddenly occurred to Paul that he needs to tell them they shouldn’t drink – it leads on from what he’s just been saying.

This is an example of what Paul is talking about. Being wise, and being careful in how we live. Getting drunk removes our ability to live wisely. Instead, it gives us an extra shove along our natural slide into immorality. So, making sure you don’t get drunk is part of being careful.

The application there to us is obvious. Don’t get drunk. But even if we don’t get drunk, I think we have to be careful before we assume this has nothing to say to us. Wine is something good which leads us into sin if we use it wrongly, because the days are evil and we’re easily tempted. So surely the same principle applies to more than just drinking, doesn’t it? What we eat, what we spend our money on, shopping, TV – there are all kinds of things which can lead to debauchery if we aren’t careful (if we aren’t wise).

There’s another **contrast** here. As Christians, we shouldn’t be filled with wine, because it will lead us to live in ways other than God intends. **Instead**, we’re to be filled with the Spirit.

The Spirit will also have an effect on our behaviour, but it will be the right kind of effect. If we’re filled with the Spirit, He will help us to live wisely. He’ll change our hearts so we’re able to live wisely. And we’ll also start to **speak wisely**.

Speak Wisely

“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v19-20).

If we’re living wisely, and we’re filled with the Spirit, then this is the kind of effect it will have on our speaking.

If you’ve ever been in a pub or at a party with a lot of **drunk people**, you’ll know that the talk is probably about as far from psalms, hymns and spiritual songs as it’s possible to get. But the speech of those who are filled with the spirit will be different.

I think this is about more than just what we do when we have a church meeting. He says “speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (v19). This is how God’s people, children of light, are to talk to each other whenever they get together.

It **sounds a bit strange**, doesn’t it, that we should sing songs to each other? But compare it to the improper ways of speaking he mentioned earlier in **chapter 5** – “obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking” (v4). Those things are completely out of place. What Paul is saying is that their speech should be **filled with Christ and with the gospel**. All through Ephesians Paul reminds them of how they are brought together in Christ – Christ is at the centre of their community. So it’s completely appropriate that Christ is at the centre of their conversations.

When was the last time you spoke to someone in psalms, hymns or spiritual songs? I don’t mean when was the last time you quoted hymn lyrics to someone. But after the morning meeting finished

this morning, what did you talk about? What was the first thing you said to the people you met? Was it about Jesus, or was it about last night's casualty?

Or if someone tells you about a problem they've got, what kind of things do you say to them? Does your reply sound more like Jesus or Jeremy Kyle?

I admit, I don't talk like this enough either (although I try to mix things up a bit when I can!). I've got a few friends who have the disturbing habit of opening conversations with questions like, "so, how is your walk with God going?" or "what have you been reading in the Bible today?" But it shouldn't be disturbing, should it? If we believe the gospel is brilliant, and the best news ever, why do we waste so much of our time talking nonsense?

Most of the time, there's some kind of music playing in my head. Usually I keep it to myself, but occasionally, it slips out (as Rudi will be able to tell you)! I think there's also an assumption here that if we're filled with the Spirit, then our hearts should be filled with praise, which will spill out. And the constant refrain will be one of thankfulness to God, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Relate Wisely

Verse 21 is an interesting one. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." I wondered whether or not to include it this time, or whether to add it to the beginning of my next sermon on Ephesians. It **fits much more obviously** with the next section, which is all about **submission**. In the rest of chapter five and in chapter six, Paul describes three different kinds of submission – *the submission of wives to their husbands, the submission of children to their parents, and the submission of slaves to their masters* (and we'll look at those at some point in the future). But I think it's useful to see how Paul leads into those sections from all this talk of living wisely...

So far, his concern has been that the **Ephesians should live out their status** as children of light. But it isn't something we can do as individuals. This letter isn't an individualised self-help plan. It's about a reconciled community living together as God's people. And living that way will require submission.

Submission isn't an easy thing for us to take on board, because in our culture we're brought up to be independent, and to be our own bosses. So the idea of anyone submitting to anyone else isn't popular, and people go through all sorts of theological contortions to get out of it. But, Paul says, we're to submit out of reverence for Christ. If we're following Christ, if we love and fear him, then we're to submit to one another, because his was the ultimate act of submission. This is probably the most difficult part of living wisely (I guess that's why he gives so much space to it).

But as I said near the start, people's opinions of what is wise differ. Wisdom doesn't always look wise in the eyes of the world. Submission certainly doesn't. In fact, nor does going easy on wine, or using your time for God. But God "chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise." We aren't to slip into the ways of the world, of those who walk in darkness. That's the thrust of what Paul has to say here – lives changed by Christ will be lived wisely.