

## "Life by the Spirit" Ephesians 5:15-21

### Introduction

- I've got a problem. There's a dog that has been pooping in my yard. Invariably, when I cut the grass I'll find several piles to clean up and that drives me nuts. For the life of me, I can't understand why a person would allow their dog to do its business on someone else's property. So, for the last year, I've been trying to catch the culprit in the act. Whenever I'd spot a person walking their dog by our yard I'd rush to the window. Miriam thinks I'm crazy. I was beginning to believe myself crazy until Good Friday this year. It was dusk on Good Friday, and Miriam, Ethan and I were driving up Third Street. And as we're nearing our house, I spotted a woman walking a rather large black dog on the sidewalk opposite our house. The woman paused and the dog squatted. And I thought out loud to Miriam, "caught her red handed." It couldn't have been a more perfect setup. The woman was directly opposite our driveway. All I had to do was make a slightly wide right turn, look out the driver's side window and I'd be able to see the woman's face.
- What do you think happened? As I slowed to turn into our driveway, I turned to look out the window and overshot the driveway. My front left bumper crashed into the curb. The car jolted to a stop right in front of this woman walking her dog. I smashed the front of my car and never did get to see that woman's face.

### Transition

- As I have reflected on my foolish behavior, I've come to realize the way I acted that night is not that different from the way many people live day in and day out. Many of us get so transfixed on the behavior of others, we get so obsessed with how others act and speak and treat us or our family that we pay absolutely no attention, we have no concept, no clue as to what our own behavior is like. I learned something that night. When you try to catch a dog pooping in your yard, don't make wide right turns. No. Seriously. I learned that I need to pay closer attention to my own behavior, my own conduct. And that's the big idea for this morning.

### Proposition

- **Pay attention to your conduct**

### Transition

- What good does it do to constantly police the behavior of others if, in the end we crash ourselves on the side of the road of life because we failed to watch our own actions? What good is it to hold each other accountable if we fail to hold ourselves accountable? **Pay attention to your conduct.** My question for you this morning is this. When was the last time you measured your conduct? When was the last time you measured your conduct against the standard, the plumb line of scripture, to see how you're doing? That's the reason I want us to explore Ephesians 5 this morning.

### Organizational Sentence

- **Ephesians 5:15-21 describes three contrasts that help us evaluate our conduct**

## Transition

- As we audit our conduct this morning, it would be a good idea to step outside yourself in order to view yourself as others might see you, as God might see your actions, your words, your behavior and then measure that conduct against Scripture. If we build patterns of behavior that continually monitor and check our behavior then the likelihood of getting sidetracked in our Christian walk will greatly diminish.

## Background/Setting

- In this passage, Paul makes three contrasting statements as he further refines what it means for a Christian to live in this world. For the fifth time now since chapter 4 began, Paul commands Christians with regard to their conduct. Look at Ephesians 4:1. *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.* Now look at 4:17. *So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.* Now flip to 5:2; *and live a life of love.* Again in 5:8. *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.* And now 5:15, our verse for this morning. *Be very careful, then, how you live.* In other words, **pay attention to your conduct.** Conduct matters.

## Transition

Let's turn now to the first contrasting statement. In verses 15-16, Paul wants us to evaluate our conduct based upon two extremes, two contrasting types of behavior, wise and foolish behavior. His point being that as we pay attention to our conduct, we need to make every moment count instead of living unwisely. That's the first point on your outline. **Make every moment count instead of living unwisely.**

## Main Points

### I. **Make every moment count instead of living unwisely (5:15-16)**

#### A) Validation

- i) If we fail to pay attention to the way we live we are likely to fall into unwise, sinful patterns of behavior. We've got to be careful. We've got to pay attention to our conduct. Life is short. Our God given mission is great. People are mired in evil and so every moment counts, every second must be purposeful. Otherwise we're living unwisely. One of the ways we can ensure our conduct is on track is by **making every moment count instead of living unwisely.** Let me explain.

#### B) Explanation

- i) Listen to **verses 15-16.** *Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.* If we want to stay on track and make our lives count for something we must live wisely and not as fools. That's the first contrast. That's the first thing we must pay attention to. Now the question we must ask is this; what does it mean to be wise? In the context of the Old Testament, wisdom means applied knowledge or skillful living or understanding that works itself into practice.<sup>1</sup> However, in the context of Ephesians, wisdom means

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<sup>1</sup> O'Brien, p. 381.

something very specific. In Ephesians, wisdom is always tied to God's plan of salvation. The term is used in 1:8-9; 1:17-19; and then in 3:10. Each instance is tied to some aspect of God's saving work, whether it is his plan to reconcile mankind to himself through the cross, or his plan to make Jew and Gentile one body, or his plan to do glorify himself through the church. The point being that in order to be wise, we must live our lives in accordance with that plan. If your life does not overlap in some way with God's plan in this world then you aren't living wisely. If your life in no way works to bring people to Christ, if you haven't developed your spiritual gifts, if you have severed yourself from the body of Christ then according to Ephesians, you are not living wisely.

- ii) Now [verse 16](#) gives us the reason as to why we are to live wisely. Time is short. The days are evil. [Henry David Thoreau](#), in his book *Walden*, said this, it's impossible to "kill time without injuring eternity."<sup>2</sup> We injure God's eternal plan when we fail to use our time wisely. Make the most of every opportunity. Snap up every opportunity<sup>3</sup> to live wisely-to live out God's plan. To give yourself to things that God calls important. Then you'll be living wisely.

#### C) Illustration

- i) This year we celebrate the 300<sup>th</sup> birthday of one of the greatest preachers to ever live, and probably the greatest theologian North America has ever produced. His name? Jonathan Edwards. God used Edwards incredibly as he ministered in North Hampton, Massachusetts to bring about the Great Awakening; a movement of God that spread from New England all over the country. When he was just 21 years old, Edwards wrote a series of resolutions to govern his life; to guard his behavior; to keep him on track. Listen to the seventieth and last on his list. "Resolved: never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can."<sup>4</sup>

#### D) Application

- i) Many people think if they make it through life with enough money to retire they've lived wisely. Or they think that if they climbed the career ladder they've lived wisely. But for the Christian, you know you've lived wisely if you've given your time to working out God's plan of salvation in this world. What are you doing with your time? Someone once said, "Lost, yesterday, somewhere between sunrise and sunset, two golden hours, each set with sixty diamond minutes. No reward offered, for they are gone forever."<sup>5</sup> Are you do everything possible to not lose a second of that precious, golden time. That's what it means to keep your life on track. Pay attention to your conduct. How do you spend your time? As wise or unwise?

### Transition

Are you ready for the second contrasting statement? If we are to pay attention to our conduct, then we must examine our decision making. That's the second point on your outline. [Make insightful decisions instead of living foolishly](#). Look at [verse 17](#).

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<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), U.S. philosopher, author, naturalist. *Walden*, "Economy" (1854).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> NIDNT, vol.1, p. 268.

<sup>4</sup> Stott, p. 202.

<sup>5</sup> Stott, p. 202, quoting Horace Mann, quoted by Ted. W. Engstrom and Alex Mackenzie in *Managing Your Time* (Zondervan, 1967), p. 63.

## II. Make insightful decisions instead of living foolishly (5:17)

### A) Validation

- i) If we fail to pay attention to the way we live we are likely to fall into, not just unwise behavior, but foolish behavior. And foolish behavior leads to poor decisions. The antidote? We've got to know what God's purposes are so that we can make life decisions based on those purposes. Otherwise, we're living the lives of fools. The command in this verse regarding our conduct is to **make insightful decisions instead of living foolishly**. Let me explain.

### B) Explanation

- i) Listen to **verse 17**. *Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.* In the Old Testament the fool lived carelessly, he lacked understanding, he despised wisdom. He acted presumptuously and independently of God.<sup>6</sup> And he bore the fruit of that in his decision making. Do you know people who continually make foolish decisions from God's perspective? Do you seem like you continually make bad decisions? Chances are there's some deficiency in your understanding of what God's will is. Now that gets us to what exactly we are to understand? What is God's will? So many people wonder what God's will is for their life. First of all, it's something we already know. We are commanded to use our own reasoning power to better understand something we already know.<sup>7</sup> Remember Ephesians 1:9? *And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ.* In Ephesians, the will of God, is directly tied to our salvation through Christ. When we understand his will in this arena it leads to holy conduct and God-glorifying decisions. Yes, God wants to guide us personally as we go through our day, as we make career choices, as we seek to choose a spouse or a college, or whatever our immediate plans our future might hold. But understand first and foremost, God's will is to form a people into Christ's likeness who will be pure and blameless.<sup>8</sup> What this means is before we pray to God asking for personal guidance in specific matters, nail down God's will in the larger arenas of growing to know God's love for us, growing to love the church more, growing in our understanding of what it means to live by grace, growing to understand what our spiritual gifts are and using them to build the body, and all the other things Ephesians talks about; nail those things first. That's God's will for you. If you are in God's will that way, the more particular aspects of His will will work themselves out. **Peter O'Brien** says, and I agree that, *"the preoccupation with [God's] personal guidance is wrongly directed **if** it is not understood first of all within this framework of God's gracious saving purposes for his world. Personalized concerns about guidance, may, in fact, be evidence of a folly which stands in contrast to, and needs to be corrected by, a true understanding of the Lord's will."*<sup>9</sup> Understanding God's will in this way will affect our decision making. For if we know all that God wants us to know about his saving work through Christ we will live differently. If we claim to have intimate knowledge of God's purposes through Christ but our lives don't bear that out

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<sup>6</sup> O'Brien, p. 384.

<sup>7</sup> Reinecker quoting Barth, p. 537.

<sup>8</sup> O'Brien, p. 386.

<sup>9</sup> O'Brien, p. 386.

personally, then we are living foolishly. Our life is off track. We have not paid close enough attention to our lives.

C) Illustration

- i) God help the person, who without paying attention, harvests some *Aethusa cynapium*<sup>10</sup> to flavor their meal. What looks like parsley is actually a poisonous weed commonly referred to as fool's parsley.

D) Application

- i) In the same way, if we don't know, or can't identify God's will, how in the world will we make good decisions? We'll just end up poisoning ourselves by our poor decisions. Just for a moment, step outside yourself and take note of your actions this past week; the words you have used. How you've behaved. In some cases, we clearly know when our lives get off track. But what we also need to keep in mind is that if we aren't grading ourselves against a standard, we won't know when or if our life might be spinning out of control. The standard by which our conduct must be measured is the Lord's will.
- ii) If you are struggling to understand what God's will is for you, let me suggest a book to read. Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* is an excellent book that gets at God's purposes, his will for your life, in the context Ephesians talks about.

### Transition

God wants us to pay attention to our conduct. How we live matters. I want us to look at [verses 18-21](#) because this last contrast, I believe, has the greatest influence on whether or not our lives stay on track day in and day out. Scripture's advice is this, and this is the third contrast, the third point on your outline. [Live under the influence instead of living recklessly](#).

### III. Live under the influence instead of living recklessly (5:18-21)

A) Validation

- i) If we fail to pay attention to the way we live we are likely to fall into, not just unwise or foolish behavior, but reckless behavior. Life lived under the influence of the Holy Spirit is the only good way to avoid reckless living. The spirit's influence is concrete, tangible even measurable to some degree. If we are allowing the Holy Spirit to influence us our conduct will show. [Live under the influence instead of living recklessly](#). Let me explain.

B) Explanation

- i) In [verses 18-21](#), Paul commands that we be filled with the Holy Spirit instead of being drunk with wine, implying that we might or might not as Christians be living under the Spirits' influence. We all know what drunkenness looks like and the kind of reckless living it leads to. Now in the first century near in the region of Ephesus, drunkenness was tied to the cult of Dionysius-the God of wine-Bacchus. The Gentile Christians Paul's writing to may have participated in this ritual before coming to

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Christ. One commentator explains that “a major feature of this worship was the holding of orgies that included heavy intoxication with wine. The purpose was to cause Dionysius to enter and fill the worshipper’s body so that he or she would comply with the deity’s will.”<sup>11</sup> We are commanded to not be influenced in this way. And so, as a foil, Paul gives the command to not be drunk with wine and contrasts that kind of reckless behavior with being filled or controlled or influenced by the Spirit. [John Stott](#) rightly points out a corrective regarding the Spirit’s influence. “It is a serious mistake to suppose that to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ is a kind of spiritual inebriation in which we lose control of ourselves. On the contrary, self-control is the final quality named as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. Under the influence of the Spirit, we do not lose control; we gain it.”<sup>12</sup> As in Galatians, Ephesians has a word or two about what happens when we live under the Spirit’s influence. These things are the measurable parts of these verses. What are they? 1) [Speaking to one another](#) 2) [singing](#) 3) [making music](#) 4) [giving thanks](#), 5) [submitting to one another](#). Let me read you my translation of these verses so that the results of Spirit filled living come through more clearly. *And do not get drunk on wine, in which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit with the result of speaking to one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; with the result of singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord; with the result of always giving thanks to God the father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; with the result of submitting to one another in reverence of Christ.* Let me briefly say a word about each of the results of being influenced by the Spirit.

- (a) [Speaking to one another](#). When we live under the Spirit’s influence we will want to worship God with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. These three words are synonymous terms referring to poetic expressions of praise to God. Just a side note, the word hymn here cannot refer to what we think of as a hymn because those didn’t exist when Paul was writing. Paul is not arguing for a particular type of song to be sung in worship, what Paul has in mind is the instructional aspect of this worship. Paul’s teaching here is captured in thought in Colossians 3:16. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.* Our worship of God must not simply be vertical. There must be a horizontal instructional component to worship. As we live out the Spirit’s influence on our lives we will want to remind and teach others of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.
- (b) Let me treat the next two together. [Singing](#) and [making music](#). These two expressions of the Spirit’s influence on our lives express the vertical component to our worship. Our worship is given to whom? To the Lord. Is there a song in your heart to God about what Christ has done for you? That’s one of the Spirit’s influences.
- (c) Next. [Giving thanks](#). Spirit filled Christians not only sing but they give thanks. Note its frequency---constantly. Note its content---for everything. Note the object of the thanks---God the Father. And note in whose name our thanks is proclaimed---in Christ’s name. There is no room for grumbling or complaining

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<sup>11</sup> O’Brien, p. 389.

<sup>12</sup> Stott, p. 204.

in the Christian life. We commanded to be people of gratitude by the Spirit's influence.

- (d) Finally. **Submitting to one another**. The word used in this verse for submission is often used in the context of "military soldiers submitting to their superior. The word has primarily the idea of giving up one's own right or will, to subordinate one's self."<sup>13</sup> Now the question is, is this submission mutual? In other words, are we called to submit to everyone at all times? I don't believe so. Instead, I think that verse 21 is a general heading urging Spirit-filled believers to be submissive or subordinate. The particular ways in which Christians are to submit to others are then identified in 5:22-6:9 which we'll spend the next two weeks looking at. "It is not mutual submission that is in view but submission to appropriate authorities."<sup>14</sup> In the next section Paul happens to mention husband wife, parent child, and master slave relationships but also in mind are the following relationships: church members submitting to their leaders (1 Cor. 16:15-16), citizens subjecting themselves to governing authorities (Rom 13:1) or the church subjecting itself to Christ (Eph 5:24). If the Spirit is influencing our lives, submission will work itself in these contexts. Now, the motivation for subordination is the fear of Christ. Fear, not terror or intimidation. But fear in the "sense of awe in the presence of one who is Lord and coming judge."<sup>15</sup>

C) Illustration

- i) The poet **Edward Rowland Sill** once quipped...

*At the punch-bowl's brink,  
Let the thirsty think,  
What they say in Japan:  
First the man takes a drink,  
Then the drink takes a drink,  
Then the drink takes the man!*<sup>16</sup>

D) Application

- i) How I wish we were taken by the Spirit in the same way. Are you letting the Spirit influence your life? Is your life manifesting the fruits of the Spirit mentioned in this passage? We've got to work at being filled by the Spirit. That means each and every day, moment by moment we allow our hearts to be receptive to Spirit's transforming work in our lives, keeping us from reckless living. It's called letting Christ rule in your heart. Letting him have free access to every part of your life.

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<sup>13</sup> Reinecker, p. 538.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien, p. 401.

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, p. 404.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Rowland Sill (1841–87), U.S. poet, essayist. *An Adage from the Orient*.