

Ephesians 5:15-20

15 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.
17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.
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.

Always giving thanks

Ephesians 5:15-20

Like last week this is another very short passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians with a lot to say. Again I have to pay tribute to John Stott's commentary on Ephesians which is so brilliant I was seriously thinking of just reading it out! My wife tells me that back in the day the 'curate' as they were then known, instead of writing a sermon, would have a book of 'homilies' and they would just read one out every week. Easy life!

Seriously, I believe God's word to us is a living thing so if it's not current and up to date it loses all its potency. These letters might have been written two thousand years ago, but God speaks through them into every culture and every country. And new things often emerge at literally the last minute which can be annoying. This can't be said of any other book, although I have to say that in a secular sphere Shakespeare doesn't do badly for staying relevant!

15 Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise
How do we live? Paul is assuming that as Christians we should consider it important to be wise. When we look at the news this week we might wonder how people end up in the terrible situations they do, and we might consider ourselves fortunate if we're inclined to think about our actions, to consider how we should behave in the light of God's teaching. Paul's word for live or behave here literally means 'walk'.

Our christian 'walk' should not follow the world's wisdom.

We should not take the lead from what is seen as good or wise by for instance what we read in the news or what we see on TV, or social circles which have an influence on us. We absorb so much subconsciously as well as consciously through the media, that we struggle to filter it all. God's commandment to love, first Him and then others, must always be the first consideration against which we compare our thoughts and actions and dreams. This might sound a very narrow and constricting attitude to life. Actually living wisely as God intends will produce the exact opposite, freedom and peace of mind, confidence to be who God made us to be, and the ability to deal with whatever problems we face.

16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil
Paul is dead right that the days are evil. When weren't they, I suppose?

But with events in Afghanistan and Plymouth this week you do wonder whether we will ever start, as a nation, to do some more joined up thinking, whether it's in regard to war or mental health, or whatever else. To think long term and not react in the short term.

The point being made here though is that the time is always *now* if we want to start acting wisely, justly and kindly in whatever situation we find ourselves. How do we use the time available to us? This does actually matter to God and it should matter to us.

17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. How do we avoid being foolish? By understanding what God's will is in any situation.

We pray this every week but maybe don't notice that this is what we're doing – thy will be done. In meaning this we surrender our own desires to God as Jesus did. Not my will but yours be done. And we look to see whether our ideas are in line with His.

There's much to be said for prayer coming direct from our own hearts rather than it being something pre-prayed, as it were, although both have value. The best expression of prayer is often just when we cry out our feelings to God, who simply listens without judgement. Then we will begin to understand His will without trying to bend it to our own.

John Stott helpfully distinguishes God's general will from His particular will. We all know his general will, for instance that we should become like Jesus. But his particular will for us as individuals, ie what job we should do, or who we should marry, is down to us, and can't be found in the bible. We need to pray and take advice and not go it alone.

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

The contrast here is with loss of control and self control. Paul contrasts being drunk with being *filled* with the Spirit, which is a very different thing. You may have noticed that some churches lose a certain amount of control when the Spirit is supposedly working, but this is not normally a sign that God is doing something. The Holy Spirit brings peace and order and not chaos.

Speaking in tongues requires just as much self control as speaking our own language. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. And the fruits of the spirit are the proof that God is doing something.

19 [speak] 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.

There are 3 actions in these 2 verses, speaking, singing and thanking, which come as a result of our being full of the Holy Spirit. **Speaking and singing** are a response to God in worship, and the early church used psalms hymns and songs, so this was public worship, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Spoken psalms could be used as an encouragement to each other, for instance Psalm 95 which says 'let us sing to the Lord, let us make a joyful noise to Him'. Singing was specifically worship to God.

Now we live in a very different world, but worship remains something which comes from our hearts to God and is central to our growth in faith, especially when we worship together.

Now that online church is increasing in popularity this is in danger of being overlooked but we do pray for people to return to worshipping God together; it's not something which can possibly be reproduced in any other way, in much the same way as live music and theatre. But corporate worship powerfully changes the spiritual atmosphere in the community.

Finally verse *20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

If you think about it this can't mean literally everything, but refers to the spirit in which we live, and that's an attitude of thankfulness and not of grumbling. We obviously don't give thanks for our suffering, but we do thank God that he can be trusted to help us, and even to turn evil to good purpose, the prime example being the very heart of the gospel, Jesus' death on the cross. So we give thanks for everything which is consistent with the loving nature of God and the supreme revelation of God in the person of Jesus. When we're continually being refilled with the Spirit this becomes the fulfilling way of life which God always intended for us when he us in his image. Amen.