

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

Wise Walking

Ephesians 5:15-21

Mark Vroegop

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:15-21).

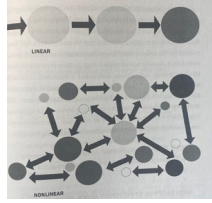
Last week I used the example of St. Louis for the way in which an invention can create change. St. Louis fell from one of the “top ten” largest city to not even being in the top seventy-five largest cities in the United States as the nation shifted from trains to airplanes. The change didn’t happen overnight. It occurred over fifty years.

There are other moments in history where life changes instantly and the ripple effects are sweeping and fast. Consider two events almost twenty years apart: 9/11 and COVID-19. Just think with me how much of our lives changed based upon those two events. It wasn’t slow and gradual. It was immediate and sweeping. What took place on 9/11 led to a physical war. COVID-19 unleashed a culture war. Or maybe I should say “culture wars.”

Life moved from being complicated to being complex. And I’m sure that you’ve sensed that increase dramatically in the last number of years. The difference, according to Pastor Mark Sayers in *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders*, is this:

“In a complicated world events may interrupt our processes and projects. In a complex world, events envelop us in their processes.”¹ A complicated world is stressful and frustrating. A complex world is disorienting and produces anxiety because of the layers of change. Here’s an image from Sayer’s book:

¹ Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2022), 131.



One way to think about this is the difference between parenting a toddler and a teenager. From a societal standpoint, the roots of our approach to a complicated world are from the Industrial Revolution where systems and efficiency were emphasized. But we are in the middle of an information and digital revolution which will have massive effects on how we live.

One result of this is a superhighway for finding people who share your sense of identity. With the absence of absolute truth and the decentralization of nearly everything, it's not hard to see how the combination of post-modern therapeutic culture, along with our digital network, can create havoc on everyone's sense of identity. You can easily find a group or network to affirm whatever you want to believe about yourself. And this is having a massive effect on discipleship in the church.

There's more anxiety in the system because definitions, morals, institutions, and meaning are all being redefined. It's overwhelming. This is a day—a moment—that calls for wisdom.

The book of Ephesians was written around 60-62 AD. We have something timeless, inspired, and trustworthy in front of us today. The church of Jesus Christ has been preserved for two thousand years, through massive moments of cultural upheaval. Jesus promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. So, take heart! And listen carefully so that you, Christian, can really understand your identity—to become who we are.

Ephesians 5:6-21 is all about the need for wisdom as we apply Christian identity to the real world. Last week I summarized this section by saying: **Christian identity requires wisdom.**

We learned about three applications in the previous sermon:

- 1) **Cautious with Influences** – Watch out for the empty words and corrupting relationships.
- 2) **Intentional with Discernment** – Try to live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord.
- 3) **Courageous with Godliness** – Be prepared to experience the tension of being light in darkness.

Our passage today, Ephesians 5:15-21, gives us two more wise applications: be careful with choices and be Spirit-empowered with what controls you. These applications give us help and hope as we navigate a complex world.

4) **Careful with Choices**

Remember that the previous text ended with “Awake, O sleeper! Arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” This was a section from a hymn and probably sung over people as they were baptized. Verse 15 helps us know what to do as we take our first steps in a dark world.

The command is clear: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.” Notice the important place of wisdom. Do you know what the word “wisdom” means? It’s all about the application of biblical truth to life. We have to know what the Bible teaches, but then we also have to figure out how to make it work in the real world.

Let me give you an example. Here’s Proverbs 26:4: “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.” But here’s Proverbs 26:5: “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” I so appreciate that these verses are positioned like this in the Bible because it illustrates how wisdom works. You have to know when and how to apply the teaching of the Bible.

Often our eyes go right to the word “wisdom,” and we forget about the rest of this text. The phrase “look carefully how you walk” is really important. There are two Greek words that are used here. The word for “look” has the sense of having vigilance, being on the lookout, and being careful. It’s not just to see and observe. It’s more about the ability to perceive and to evaluate. That’s why the word “carefully” is included. It has the sense of looking with a level of intentionality and accuracy.

John Stott suggests that Paul is reminding Christians about the priority of Christian living. He says that people will take time to think carefully about their jobs, their education, their hobbies, and their appearance. It’s a natural way that we operate. And he’s trying to elevate the priority of living as a Christian in the world. He knows that it’s very easy to become distracted by other things. And just think how much more complex our world is now than it was during Paul’s day.

A friend of mine says, “Mass destruction of the church is happening by mass distraction.” One step is simply to recognize this reality and raise our awareness regarding our choices. I’ve said before that the problem with our thinking is that often we don’t think about our thinking. This is a dangerous time to just put your brain and heart on autopilot. Look carefully how you walk. Use wisdom.

The second admonition relates to how we think about time. Verse 16 says, “making the best use of the time.” Other translations say, “redeeming the time.” At first, you might think this verse is about stewardship. It might land on you as if Paul is saying to not waste time, be efficient, and don’t be lazy. That might be good counsel, but he has more in mind here. Notice that the text says, “making the best use of **the time**.” Perhaps it would help you to hear it this way: “make the best use of the moment.”

Paul is admonishing us to be careful with our choices so that we can wisely discern how to live as Christians in the age in which we live. Some Christians are stuck in the past. They think back to another era of history or in their life, and everything is compared to that season. As a result, they can sound negative about the present and overly positive about a previous era. Their spiritual nostalgia creates an emotional negativity. On the other hand, there are other Christians who are stuck in a holding pattern until they can figure things out or know how to move forward. Their emotional sensitivity creates a spiritual passivity.

Paul instructs us to make the best use of the time that we’re in because the days are evil. It was evil in 62, 1062, 1962; and it will still be evil in 2062—39 years from now when I’ll be 91 years old. If you are waiting for it to be easier, better, safer, or more Christian, you’ll be disappointed.

There are some of you who have put off particular spiritual decisions like getting baptized, church membership, joining a class/group, mentoring someone, or going on a Vision Trip. Maybe you are waiting to graduate, to have your dream job, to be married, to have kids, for an empty nest, or for retirement. Paul's encouragement here is to make the best use of the time. Make careful choices about how to wisely honor the Lord.

That's why the text ends with "don't be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (v. 17). It's similar to what we read last week about trying to discern what is pleasing to the Lord (v. 10). The point is simply that to be a Christian means that you live with a constant concern for the will of the Lord.

Knowing and understanding the will of the Lord is more than just helping you to decide what job to take or whom to marry or what condo to buy. The will of the Lord is a total perspective. And it starts with knowing that you were placed in the world during this generation for a reason.

Therefore, we're to make choices that fit with our identity as those who are placed here with divine purpose.

Christian, the apostle Paul is inviting you to consider how to be careful with your choices. Let me ask you a few questions:

- How "heads up" are you with all the choices in life?
- Are you living intentionally and with the right priorities?
- Do you think regularly about God's will for your life?
- How's your spirit about the time/age in which you live?

Christian identity requires the wisdom to live with wisdom.

5) Spirit-Empowered with What Controls You

The final wisdom point is in regard to what is controlling you. Remember that identity and actions are linked, and Paul's desire is for the believers in Ephesus to have lives that are marked by the empowerment of the Spirit. In verses 18-21, he tells us what that *doesn't* look like and also what it *could* look like.

First, what spiritual wisdom doesn't look like. "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery" (v. 18). Not much has changed since 62 AD! When you think of someone "being under the influence," alcohol immediately comes to mind. Now, this should not be limited just to wine. Paul certainly would have included other substances if he were writing today. He's concerned about drunkenness and debauchery. He's addressing a kind of control that is ungodly.

I suspect that you might not know what "debauchery" means. It's not a common word. I wish the ESV would choose a more familiar translation of the word. However, I suspect that you know exactly what it looks like. The word "debauchery" means recklessness and a level of wild living. In other words, debauchery means that wine controls you. Or you could think of it as the person has lost control. Another meaning of the word is wasteful and excessive living. Think "He's wasted."

The challenge, however, is also the association connected to debauchery. Another way the word is used is related to prodigal living, the kind of life that you live that's far from your moral home. You probably aren't surprised that Paul connects these, are you? Drunkenness opens the door for all kinds of wild living. And the reason? Because it takes control.

What does Paul suggest instead? Well, he says, "be filled with the Spirit." This means to be controlled by the Spirit. At conversion every believer is indwelt with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13). To be filled means that the Spirit has his full effect. It's to experience the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. It's to be marked by an other-worldly control of you that is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Becoming who we are involves an unusual level of spiritual control. Paul says that walking in wisdom requires this kind of spiritual empowerment. Walking wisely means that it's the Spirit who controls us, leading us to reflect the heart of God.

What follows are four participial phrases connected to being filled with the Spirit. Take note of the words "addressing one another in psalms...", "singing and making melody...", "giving thanks always..." and "submitting to one another..." These four participial phrases describe what it looks like when the Spirit fills God's people. John Stott summarizes this with four words: Fellowship, worship, gratitude, and submission.²

- **Fellowship:** It's interesting that Paul leads with "addressing one another." The context is clearly a worship service. That's why he says psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We'll see this even further in the next point. But the word has the idea of speaking to each other. To be filled with the Spirit looks like gathering with God's people for spiritual fellowship. No one is filled with the spirit in order to be a solo Christian.
- **Worship:** Stott suggests that "singing and making melody" may refer to congregational singing and musical instruments.³ Take careful note of the reference to "with your heart." The idea seems to be that the church gathers together to praise God together with each heart on fire with love for God. Being present is a good start, but Paul envisions some level of personal passion.
- **Gratitude:** The next characteristic of being filled with the Spirit is thanksgiving. Notice the all-encompassing nature of this instruction: "always and for everything." Being filled with the Spirit creates an orientation where you connect your daily experience to the kindness and mercy of God. You can't be controlled by the Spirit and be filled with grumbling. Gratitude emerges from a heart that understands who God is and who we are. It doesn't take blessings for granted.
- **Submission:** This last description runs contrary to the individualism of our day and age. The word means to be willing to follow another's lead. It shows deference to the needs, desires, or authority

² John R. W. Stott, [*God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 205.

³ Ibid.

of another person. This reflects the heart and posture of Jesus who was marked by meekness and gentleness.

In order to walk in wisdom, we must be filled with the Spirit. But did you notice how being filled with the Spirit is connected to other people—especially the church? Being spirit-empowered believers doesn't happen well apart from other people.

More than ever, we need vibrant, healthy communities. The challenge, of course, is that our digital and networked age creates so many other alternatives. Mark Sayers offers this cautionary word:

“In the networked world even the most committed believer will consume only a fraction of the information and input from their church compared to what they consume via podcasts, YouTube, and Netflix. The digital network is now our primary formational environment. It shapes our opinions, values, and worldview today. The average church goer will Google a problem before they approach their pastor. The digital network is the primary shaper of their theological political and cultural worldview....Even with those who are very committed they are busier than ever, attend church less frequently, and have many options for socializing outside of faith community.”⁴

May I ask you a few questions?

- What controls your emotions, feelings, and passion? Where does Jesus fit in that?
- Are you intentionally investing time, effort, and resources in the life of the church?
- Do you understand the culture in which you are living and how it affects your soul?
- Do you see the value of what happens on Sunday mornings?

We live in a complex world. It's a day that calls for knowing who we are and for wisdom. It's a day to be careful with our choices and spirit-empowered with what controls us.

Christian identity requires wisdom.

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⁴ Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence*, 95.