

November 19, 2023

A SERIES OF CONTRASTS AND THE NEED TO WALK CAREFULLY

Ephesians 5:15-21

(11 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

When Jonathan Edwards was eighteen years old, he sat down and wrote down twenty-one resolutions for how he wanted to live his life. He'd been converted the year prior, and he realized that he wanted to live differently in light of the glorious work that the Lord had done to save him. He would add to them throughout the next year until writing his last resolution on August 17, 1723. By the time he was finished there were seventy in all. I'll read a few to give you a taste of them. Edwards wrote, "Resolved, To live with all my might, while I do live," and again, "Resolved, Never to say anything at all against any body, but when it is perfectly agreeable to the highest degree of Christian honour, and of love to mankind, agreeable to the lowest humility, and sense of my own faults and failings, and agreeable to the golden rule," and once more, "Resolved, To endeavour to my utmost, so to act, as I can think I should do, if I had already seen the happiness of heaven and hell torments."¹

He finished these two months before his twentieth birthday. And you really should read them all. It's astounding to see his mind at eighteen and nineteen years old. But as overwhelmingly impressive as these are, it doesn't seem that we should see them as out of line with what it means to live as a believer. After all, one could imagine that what very well could have spurred Edwards on to write out such resolutions was not only his sense that a believer should live differently but his reflection on the specific text we're looking at this morning, Ephesians 5:15-21.

It would not be shocking to find any believer wanting to sit down and write out a list of resolutions in response to this text because Paul writes to us, saying, "Look carefully then how you walk" (v. 15), which is another way of saying, "Look carefully at how you live." Paul calls us to intentionally examine how we're living and will live. There are certain ways that believers must live that are different than unbelievers. We've seen this already as we've studied through all of chapter 4 and half of chapter 5 in this letter, as Paul has called us to put off certain actions that were characteristic of our old life and put on certain actions that are characteristic of our new life in Christ. But in this text he perhaps speaks most pointedly about the fact that we need to think carefully about how we live. And so it's good for us to sit and consider what Paul says that careful living looks like for a believer. It may well be that we conclude our time looking at this text with some resolutions of our own for how we'd like to live.

The structure of the text is somewhat easy to see. Paul opens the text saying, "Look carefully then how you walk." That is, as those who are light and should be light to this world of darkness, we must examine our lives and make sure we're living in accord with who we are in Christ. Then,

¹ As recorded by Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987), 43.

he gives us three contrasts that are marked by a “not . . . but” contrast. In other words, he’s saying to us, “Do *not* live that way, *but* live this way.” We see it first at the end of verse 15 as he says, “Not as unwise but as wise,” then again in verse 17 as he writes, “Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is,” and then finally in verse 18 as he writes, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.”

Therefore, I want to walk through each of these contrasts and note how it is that we’re supposed to live as believers. And the first thing we can say that is we’re to walk in wisdom, making the most of our time.

We’re to walk in wisdom, making the most of our time (vv. 15-16)

Paul writes in verses 15-16, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” So, the first way that we walk carefully is by walking as wise people. But Paul doesn’t stop there because we would probably ask, “What does walking in wisdom look like?” He gives us specific instruction for what that looks like. The one who walks in wisdom in this life makes the most of his or her time. We take advantage of the moments provided to us and use them wisely.

In other words, we live intentionally. I remember my second paycheck well. I’d gotten paid from the church as I was serving as the interim. It was May of 1999, and I had called my dad to say, “Hey, I’m getting regular paychecks.” I honestly called so that my dad might say, “I’m proud of you” or “Good grief, son, you’re doing really well,” or the like, and I think it was implied in what he said. But what he actually said was, “Great. There are a few things I’ve been paying for that you can start paying for.” And then he went on to tell me how much my car insurance, my car payment, and a few other items that I’d not been paying for cost. And sure enough, with that second paycheck I’d earned, I paid for all of them—and more. I was able to pay for all those things and give. It was amazing, I felt, how much I was paying for, how far my paycheck was going.

But all of this raises a question, doesn’t it? What happened to my first paycheck? And the answer is: I don’t know. I don’t mean I don’t know if I cashed it or deposited it. I certainly did. But I hadn’t developed a budget yet. I hadn’t sat down and determined where every penny was going to go. I did that with my second paycheck after talking with my dad and with every paycheck thereafter. But not that first one. And to this day I have no idea what in the world I spent that money on. I have nothing to show for it that I can remember. I had no plan for how I’d spend that money, and so I didn’t spend it in an intentional way.

That’s how Paul says we need to think of the time given to us. We need to spend it intentionally. Just as with a budget you tell each dollar how it’s going to be spent, tell each minute of the day how it will be spent instead of flitting around all day and looking up at the end of the day and saying, “Man, what happened with all my time? I’ve got nothing to show for it.”

Specifically Paul says that we need to make the best use of the time because the days are evil (v. 16). What does he mean by that? Well, the way the Bible views this time until the coming of Christ is as an age, and then the time after the coming of Christ into eternity is another age. So we can speak of this present age and the age to come. And this present age is an age where Satan, sin, and death are functioning like tyrants. That's why Satan is called "the god of this age" in 2 Corinthians 4:4², and Paul refers to this age in Galatians 1:4 as "the present evil age." By comparison, of course, the age to come will be perfect. But we're not there yet. We're still in this present evil age where Satan, sin, and death are showing their might and rule at every turn.

Therefore, Paul tells us that we need to make the most of our time precisely because the days in this age are evil. In other words, everything in this age feels like it's fighting against us. In eternity, I suspect, we will just drift toward good things, but not in this age. It requires us to be focused and intentional about how we're going to spend (and not waste) our time. This is why two of Edwards's resolutions were: "Resolved, Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I can" and "Resolved, To live with all my might, while I do live."

Now, this doesn't mean that we can't have time for rest and leisure. Of course we can. But be intentional about those as well. When we aren't intentional about working and resting, here's what happens: we rest and play while we're supposed to be working, and we get distracted by work when we should be resting or playing. Live intentionally, seizing each moment in a way so as to live unto the Lord's glory in all we do. But this raises a question, doesn't it? What should I be doing with my time so that I can know the Lord is being glorified in my life? The answer to that question is in our second piece of instruction from our text. We're to understand and live out God's will.

We're to understand and live out God's will (v. 17)

After noting the need to live an intentional life, reflecting wisdom, Paul adds in verse 17, "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." This makes sense in light of what we just said. Using each moment of time intentionally and in wisdom means living each moment unto God's glory. But living each moment unto God's glory requires us to know what glorifying God looks like. This, it seems, is why Paul moves in the next moment to exhorting us to understand what the will of the Lord is.

But we need to clarify two things about what Paul says here in terms of knowing God's will. First, I think that Paul speaks of God's will mainly in terms of what God has revealed in his Word. Here's what I mean. Most of the time, when you and I speak of knowing God's will we immediately move to areas that God hasn't specifically addressed in his Word. So, we think of things like, "Should I marry this godly man or that one? Should I take this specific job or that

² The ESV translates this "god of this world," but it is more literally "god of this age" as the word is *αιωνος* (*aiōnos*).

one? Should I go to this school that upholds God’s Word or that one?” With those questions, either option presents something good, something that fits within the parameters of the commands of Scripture. We simply don’t know which of these good options to pursue. We need to know God’s will. That’s how we most often speak of God’s will. But I don’t think that’s how the Bible chiefly speaks of God’s will, and I don’t think that’s how Paul is speaking here.

When the Bible speaks of God’s will, it mostly refers to what God has revealed in his Word. In other words, we know God’s will—in the way Paul is most likely using the term here—by knowing the Bible. Therefore, Paul is exhorting us to know the content of the Scriptures and to renew our minds to it accordingly. A great number of issues in our lives are determined by simple obedience to God’s Word, whether we’re told explicitly what to do or by implication of what we’re explicitly told to do.

But the second thing I want to clarify here is the word “understand.” Paul isn’t simply telling us to learn (and even memorize) the content of God’s commands. Again, that’s part of it. But his exhortation to understand the Lord’s will is an exhortation to obey the Lord’s will. After all, how can we claim that we truly understand God’s will if we don’t do what he says? For example, if you tell me that you understand what God means when he says, “Do not steal,” and you keep lifting people’s wallets, I’ll probably suggest you don’t *really* understand what that command means.

So Paul is telling us to know our Bibles and obey them. On Friday, I spoke in Union’s chapel and addressed the issue of Joseph’s obedience to marry Mary after the angel told him that the child in her womb was conceived of the Spirit. And I noted that we might be tempted to diminish how impressive it is that Joseph obeyed the angel. But if we’re tempted to say, “Well, who wouldn’t obey an angel?” That suggests that the only reason you and I don’t obey is because we don’t have a direct word from God telling us what to do. Otherwise we would obey. Well, brothers and sisters, we do. This book is God’s Word. Every command is a direct command from God to us. There’s no guesswork. So let’s learn it and make the best use of our time in these evil days by obeying it at every point.

Those are the first two ways that we live as believers in this world, and Paul mentions a third. He tells us in verses 18-21 that we’re to be filled with the Spirit, bearing his fruit in our lives.

We’re to be filled with the Spirit, bearing his fruit in our lives (vv. 18-21)

Paul adds his third contrast, instructing us how to live, as he writes in verse 18, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” Let’s start with the negative. We’re not to get drunk. The fact that the text says “with wine” isn’t meant to be a limiting factor. All the varieties of alcoholic beverages simply weren’t available at that time. So, obviously, we could add that we shouldn’t get drunk with any kind of alcoholic beverage. The Bible forbids drunkenness.

Sometimes the church has wrongly taught that the Scripture forbids drinking alcohol altogether when it simply doesn't, though there can be a great number of reasons why many of us shouldn't drink at all. But at the same time, some who want to enjoy alcohol have done so in order to get drunk, and have even made light of it, but the Bible explicitly forbids that right here. Paul even notes that drunkenness is debauchery. That is, it's simply an indulgence of our fleshly pleasures, and will lead us to pursue more indulgence of our fleshly pleasures. So, we must not be drunk.

And yet this isn't Paul's main point. He's contrasting getting drunk with alcohol with what he wants us to do, positively. Instead of getting drunk with wine, Paul tells us to be filled with the Spirit. Here, he probably means "be filled by the Spirit," as the Spirit is the one doing the filling, and the content of our filling is the Triune God. We can say this because Paul has already told us that he prays that his hearers "may be filled with all the fullness of God" (3:19) and wants us to attain to the "fullness of Christ" (4:13). So when he speaks of being filled by the Spirit, I think he means being filled by the Spirit with all the fullness of God.

But what does that mean? Well, in the parallel text in Colossians, instead of saying, "Be filled with the Spirit," Paul says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (3:16). And I don't think he's saying something altogether different there. The idea seems to be that the Lord must exercise his reign in our lives so that by the power of his Spirit we obey his Word. We must yield ourselves to the Lord the same way we yield ourselves to the control of alcohol when we get drunk. We walk in yielded obedience to our Lord and allow his Spirit to change us more and more into conformity to the image of Christ.

And Paul then tells us what our lives will look like when we are being filled with the Spirit. He mentions four things we'll do. First, the Spirit's work in our lives will show itself as we are, "Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (v. 19a).

My guess is that we shouldn't try too hard to parse out the difference between psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. But if I had to, I'd say that psalms are obviously what we see in the Psalter. Hymns are seen in New Testament texts that provide brief summaries of Christ and his work. And spiritual songs may be like what Paul speaks of when he writes to the Corinthians of gathering and notes that one of them may bring a song. But, like I said, we probably shouldn't get too focused on the potential differences in these songs. The key is that we're singing these songs to one another (otherwise we cannot address one another). And that doesn't happen without gathering with other believers. Therefore, one of the fruits that is borne out in our lives when we yield walk in obedience to the desires of the Spirit in accord with God's Word is that we gather with the saints in order to edify them as we sing. Allow the Spirit to move you to obey Christ's work, and you'll desire to gather with the saints regularly and edify them in singing.

But our singing isn't limited to singing to one another. Paul also adds, "Singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (v. 19b). Just as the Spirit moves us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, so it moves us to love and long to make much of our Lord. And so our hearts are

filled with praise and worship of the Lord. The Spirit moves all believers to love God and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Then, Paul adds, “Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 20). Walking as a Spirit-filled believer means that we’re grateful. We simply cannot claim to be a mature believer without a heart that recognizes that all good in our lives is due to God alone, and therefore we feel grateful and eager to thank God for all things. As believers, this includes areas where we don’t understand all that the Lord is doing, but we know that he is good and works all for our good. Our testimonies to one another should regularly be filled with language that makes much of God and his goodness in our lives. Instead of giving in to the longing to make sure others are impressed with us, let’s make sure that when others encounter us they leave impressed with God.

And, finally, Paul tells us that being filled with the Spirit will result in us submitting to human authorities that he has placed in our lives. Paul ends, writing, “Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (v. 21). Now, in the next several sections, Paul is going to flesh this out. He’s going to speak of this in terms of marriage, parenting, and the world. But here he first lists it generally. So before we dive into the specifics of this, we can simply note that one of the ways we show our submission to the Lord is by submitting to human authorities the Lord has put over us. And yet we must always understand that no human authority (ever) is our absolute authority. We must ultimately submit to the Lord. But inasmuch as obeying our human authorities is in line with God’s Word, we show our submission to him as we submit to those the Lord has put over us.

Brothers and sisters, you and I must live intentional lives. We must make the most of our time, know and obey God’s Word, and yield our lives to the Spirit who leads us to love and edify our brothers and sisters, love and praise God, walk with grateful hearts, and submit to those the Lord has put in authority over us. And as we live in this way we may draw honor to our Lord who loved us and gave himself for us. So let’s give thanks to him now as we come to the table. Amen.