

Ephesians 5:15-21
(Proverbs 8:12-17, 32-36; Matthew 7:24-29)
“A Life of Wisdom”

Introduction

At the end of this very practical call to leave behind our old ways of living and to step into the new life given us through the gospel of Christ, Paul summarizes this section by calling us to leave the life of folly and to seek the wisdom that the Scriptures throughout the Old Testament and New promise to God’s children. He writes, “Look carefully how you walk, not as unwise but as wise” (5:15).

In our Old Testament lesson, Solomon counsels those who would be wise to fear God and hate evil. That sounds strange in a Western Christian culture that manifests little fear of God and that seems casual about sin. Jesus, in our Gospel lesson from the Sermon on the Mount, tells us that the foolish person hears his words and fails to do what he teaches, and so is like a person who builds his house upon the sand, and when life’s storms come, as they always do, the house is washed away. The wise person, Jesus says, is one who hears his words and does what he teaches, and so is like a person who builds upon a rock, and whose house stands firm in life’s storms.

But what is wisdom, and why does the Bible make such a point of commending it? Why is wisdom always seen as the way that leads to life and folly as the way that leads to death? Does the Bible favor the highly intelligent, the well educated, and hold in contempt those with limited ability or little access to education? No! Wisdom cannot be purchased the way one can purchase an education, nor is it learned the way that one can study and master a particular subject. Wisdom is not simply the acquisition of a great deal of knowledge. A person of high intelligence and world-class education may be a fool, and a person of limited intelligence and little education may yet have great wisdom.

What, then, is wisdom? Natural wisdom is the result of a person attentive to the lessons that only the experience of living can bring. The wise person is able to use what they know to accomplish ends that are good and just and lovely. The wisdom that God gives enables one to take whatever comes as an opportunity to love the Lord and to love others wisely and well. God gets glory and people are well loved and well served.

But where is one to go for this wisdom? Is there a standard by which to measure what we believe to be wise? What is the source of both the desire for wisdom and ability to live wisely? And what is the evidence that one is wise? All of these questions Paul answers in the short scope of these few verses before us this morning.

Body

1. The school of wisdom: the real world of space and time (5:16).

“Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.” Wisdom is not found by going off to seminary or by taking a course in wisdom, helpful as both of those things may be in giving you additional knowledge. There are many excellent reasons for building spiritual retreat into the rhythm of your life, times of reflection and meditation. But the school of wisdom is ordinary time, the days of our lives, in which we have the opportunity to learn from victory and defeat, from joy and sorrow, from times of love and times of rejection, how life is to be lived for God’s glory and for the good of those he has entrusted to us.

The challenge is to make the best use of the time given us, even though we see evil all around us, and sometimes think that we can never live wisely unless we change contexts. We have all the time there is during the days of our lives, and even when we find ourselves doing what brings only weariness, such times are opportunities for growing in wisdom.

For example, when my children were young, I remember reading a book by Henry Nouwen in which he described how he grew in his knowledge of Christ by caring for disabled people who could not care for themselves. My wife interrupted my reading by asking me to bathe our children. I was not happy with the interruption, and wondered how I could possibly grow as Nouwen had grown if my meditations were interrupted by child care – until it dawned on me that there was no difference at all between bathing one’s children and bathing disabled people entrusted to one’s care. Each offered the privilege of giving one’s time and energy to the loving care of another.

2. The standard of wisdom: the Lord’s will (5:17).

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” But where are we to find a standard against which to measure what we believe we are learning as we go through life? Paul’s response is, “understand what the will of the Lord is.” Where do I find God’s will? You find it in his word read as the apostles read it: through the life and story of Jesus. Jesus said that the law and the prophets hang on the two-fold great command: love the Lord and love one another. Jesus described the life of wisdom in his Sermon on the Mount, and deepened our reading of the Ten Commandments.

In this letter, Paul has given many practical examples of wisdom versus folly, focusing on what we think and say and do. In other words, the standard is here and it is clear: love the Lord and others and learn to be self-forgetful. Think, say and do the things that build up rather than the things that tear down. Don’t be controlled by circumstances, but live in hope of what is

coming, and even live now in the presence of the future. As we say every Sunday, live in such a way that those who know you and who observe your life will have reason to believe that the Gospel is true.

3. The source of wisdom: the Holy Spirit (5:18).

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” Paul contrasts being full of wine with being full of the Holy Spirit, and invites us to be continually being filled with the Spirit. The Spirit brings us the benefits of what Christ has done for us and empowers us to do what Christ has entrusted to us. The Spirit is Emmanuel, God with us, in this present age. When we grieve the Spirit, we lose that sense of the Lord’s presence and the power to desire and do his will. Keep short accounts with the Lord, daily confessing, repenting and rejoicing in his grace and willingness to fill again with the power of God those who come to him in repentant faith.

We noted last Sunday the Trinitarian backbone of this text: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children” (5:1), “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (5:2). And here, “be filled with the Spirit” (5:18). Again, in these final verses, Paul reminds us of the Father and Son, even as he calls us to be filled with the Spirit: “giving thanks to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20). This is typical of the Trinitarian structure of Paul’s thought. In this letter, he has called us to be full of God, three times repeating the idea referring in turn to each person of the Trinity: “that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19), “until we all attain to ... the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (4:13), and “be filled with the Spirit” (5:18). God alone, through his Spirit, is wisdom’s source.

4. The evidence of wisdom: God-honoring speech and humility (5:19-21).

“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.” Paul depicts a person on the path of wisdom as someone whose heart is so filled with gratitude to God that one’s words and songs are simply an overflow of joyful thanksgiving.

The King James translates verse nineteen as “speak to yourself with psalms,” etc. Our translation and most others translate this as “addressing one another in psalms,” etc. Both of these are necessary: unless we have a song in our heart, we will not speak to others joyfully, for from the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. We are called, as well, to make “melody to the Lord with [our] heart” (5:19). So, the key is this: the wise are marked speech that honors God and builds people up.

And, the wise are marked by humility: “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” This final verse calling us to mutual submission is actually the theme of the verses that follow. Paul will describe how loving submission to one another in Christ should radically affect the way that husbands and wives, parents and children, bosses and workers, relate to one another.

Conclusion

The Bible throughout sets before us the way of wisdom and the way of folly. The one leads to life, the other to death. Paul has repeated that call in the verses we have studied this morning, pointing us to the school of wisdom (the days of our lives), the standard of wisdom (the will of the Lord), the source of wisdom (the Spirit of God), and the evidence of wisdom (God-honoring, upbuilding speech and humility).

As Moses said long ago to the people of Israel, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

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