

5:15–20 Living Carefully and Wisely

There are three exhortations in 5:15–18, each in the form “not-but.” The metaphorical contrast between wisdom and folly replaces the metaphor of light and darkness, and Mitton draws out the implication of this change: “This means that the recognition that we live in a world where evil actions are followed by evil consequences is the first step toward wise conduct.”¹⁷²

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise” (5:15). O’Brien says, “To be wise is to grasp the significance of the Lord’s will. But the unwise live as those who despise or have no true understanding of God’s gracious purposes.” This call to live carefully and wisely is followed by a “not-but” clause which applies the exhortation specifically to the important task of making the most of every opportunity that comes their way (5:6) to manifest the light of Christ. The verb rendered “making the most of” is used in Galatians in the sense of to “redeem,” an active action (Gal 3:13; 4:5). But its use in Colossians—“make the most of every opportunity” (Col 4:5)—suggests that it is to be understood in the same way (as middle voice) here, too—that is, in the sense of “buying up for yourselves.” The NIV rendering “making the most of every opportunity” captures the sense very well. The final clause, “because the days are evil” (5:16b), is a motivating clause—since they live in a hostile society, they must be prudent and wise in their activities and choices.

The word “therefore” (5:17) indicates that the second exhortation—“do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is”—is based on the previous one. It consists of two parts: one negative and the other positive. The apostle exhorts his readers “to understand what the Lord’s will is” and contrasts this with being “foolish.” The verb “understand” here involves giving one’s mind to something in order to grasp it. It implies effort, and Bruce’s comment is apt: “The doing of his [God’s] will is not a matter of irrational impulse but of intelligent reflection and action.” O’Brien observes that in the Pauline letters, and especially in Ephesians, “the ‘will of God’ is closely related to, even identified with, God’s gracious saving plan and, as a significant element of this, the formation of a people into the likeness of Christ, who will be pure and blameless on the final day.”¹⁷⁶ These priorities are assumed here.

Like the preceding two exhortations, the exhortation in 5:18 also is in two parts—a negative and a positive. “Do not get drunk on wine” is followed by a motivating clause—“which leads to debauchery”—and then a contrasting exhortation, “be filled with the Spirit.” This is followed by four participial clauses which explain what being filled with the Spirit involves. Martin notes the present continuous form of the verb “be filled” and suggests that since drunkenness was probably a common phenomenon in Ephesus, the apostle is urging his readers to be preoccupied, instead, with the Spirit. This antithesis between drunkenness and the fullness of the Spirit finds a parallel in Acts 2:13. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the emphasis is clearly on the second part of the antithesis—being filled with the Spirit. Fee cautions that this text must not be completely individualized since, in the context, the imperative has to do with community life. The call is to God’s people to be so “full of God” by his Spirit that our worship and our homes give full evidence of the Spirit’s presence.

The four participial clauses (speaking ... sing [ing] ... psalming [make music in the NIV] ... giving thanks) derive a certain imperative (command) force from the clause, “be filled with the Spirit,” on which they depend. They are to be treated as coordinate rather than subordinate. They

modify the subject and thus describe the condition of those who are continually being filled in the sphere of the Spirit.

The verb “speaking” (5:19) is not necessarily restricted to normal conversation and can apply to the medium of psalms, hymns, and songs. While it is unnecessary to differentiate strictly between these three terms, generally speaking, “psalms” probably refer to the Psalter, “hymns” to Christian canticles—like the one from which the apostle has just quoted (5:14)—and spiritual “songs” to Spirit-inspired spontaneous praise. Martin suggests that the phrase “speaking to one another” probably indicates that the psalms, hymns, and songs were intended as a medium for mutual encouragement and exhortation among Christians. This suggestion finds some support in the parallel text in Colossians, where singing is set in the context of teaching and admonishing “one another” (Col 3:16). But Paul also adds, “sing and make music from [literally, “in”] your heart to the Lord” (5:19). Whatever benefit individual participants derive from corporate worship, the primary focus of such worship is the Lord. The expression “from your heart” may be rendered “with your heart” (ESV), meaning “with one’s whole being.”¹⁸⁰ Although Paul adds “giving thanks” (5:20) as a necessary component of worship, such gratitude is also a sign of being filled with the Spirit. The adverb “always” probably signifies that thanksgiving ought to be a regular feature of Christian worship.

This passage exemplifies how eschatology was used in the NT as a basis for ethical exhortation. On the one hand, the church age—that is, the period between the first and second comings of Christ—is regarded as an “evil” time (5:16). Therefore, believers are called to be careful, wise, and discerning in the way they conduct themselves, seeking the will of the Lord in everyday matters. On the other hand, they must seize every opportunity that comes their way to live as children of light. This implies that Christians are required to be witnesses to the change that has been wrought in their lives as a result of becoming believers. It also implies that they have an obligation in relation to the society in which they live.

The contrast between being filled with the Spirit and getting drunk with wine underlines the point that Christians are meant to be enthusiastic about their faith and experience. Drunken people cannot hide their drunkenness! It is self-evident. But can we say the same about our being Spirit-filled? Moreover, are we really comfortable with our spirituality being evident to others, or do we try to hide it?¹

¹ Brian Wintle and Ken Gnanakan, *Ephesians*, ed. Andrew B. Spurgeon, Steve Chang, and Brian Wintle, Asia Bible Commentary Series (Carlisle, Cumbria; Manila, Philippines: Langham Global Library; Asia Theological Association, 2020), 121–124.