

CHAPTER 12

Ephesians 5:15–20

LISTEN to the Story

¹⁵Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. ¹⁸Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Listening to the text in the Story: Exodus 32:5–6; Proverbs 1:7; 4:10–14; 13:20; 23:20, 31; 28:26; Acts 2:1–21; Romans 13:11–14; 1 Corinthians 1:20–24; Colossians 1:15–20; 2:2–3.

Ephesians 5:15–20 flows smoothly from the earlier part of the chapter, connected both rhetorically (*oun*, “then” in 5:15) and thematically (*peripateō*, living/walking) to 5:1–14. In fact, 5:15–20 adds to the conversation begun in 4:1, “live a life [walk] worthy of the calling you have received.” This theme of living/walking reappears in 5:2, “walk in the way of love” and 5:8, “live [walk] as children of light.” Verse 15 begins with “be very careful, then how you live [walk].” It introduces a passage that provides a different perspective on how we are to live/walk, looking from the vantage point of wisdom.

Ephesians 5:15–20 also flows smoothly into what follows. The Greek verb in verse 21, translated in English as “submit,” is actually a participle dependent on the imperative of verse 18, “be filled ... submitting.” So breaking the flow of thought between verses 20 and 21 can be potentially misleading, though it makes it easier for the interpreter to grasp what would otherwise be an overly long passage with many themes. When we get to verse 21, we will remember its dependence on verse 18.

p 182 EXPLAIN the Story

Summary of Ephesians 5:15–20

Paul begins by urging us to watch ourselves carefully so that we might live wisely rather than foolishly (5:15–17). Wise living includes avoiding drunkenness and instead being filled with the Spirit (5:18). Such filling involves speaking (5:19), singing and making music (5:19), giving thanks (5:20), and submitting (5:21). The passage is structured by three parallel “not this ... but this”

expressions (Greek *mē ... alla*): not unwise but wise (5:15), not foolish but understanding (5:17), and not drunk but filled with the Spirit (5:18).

Pay Careful Attention to How You Live (5:15–17)

Be careful, then, how you live (5:15). The Greek reads more literally, “Watch carefully, then, how you walk.” The Greek verb translated in the NIV as “be careful” is *blepō*, the basic word for “to see.” It has the sense of “watch, beware of” in several New Testament passages, most notably in Mark 13, where the imperative of *blepō* is rendered “watch out” (Mark 13:5) or “be on your guard” (Mark 13:9, 23, 33). In Ephesians 5, though the eschatological urgency is not as strong as in Mark 13, Christians nevertheless must watch carefully because, though they are light, they are living in darkness, in the midst of evil days (Eph 5:8, 11, 16).

Not as unwise but as wise (5:15). Verse 17 makes a similar point with slightly different language, “do not be foolish, but understand.” These verses connect Christian living to wisdom and thus to one of the major themes in the grand story of God. In the Old Testament book of Proverbs, for example, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov 1:7). A father instructs his son in “the way of wisdom” that leads him “along straight paths” (4:11). Thus the son will not “walk in the way of evildoers” (4:14). Christians join themselves to the Jewish wisdom tradition now interpreted in light of Christ who is the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24).

Making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil (5:16). The NIV translation irons out an intriguing wrinkle in the original language. The verb translated as “making the most of” is *exagorazō*, which means to “buy up” or “redeem.” It appears in Galatians, where Christ “redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Gal 3:13). Thus a more straightforward rendering of verse [p 183](#) 16 might be, “redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” Yet what does this mean and how can we do it?

In apocalyptic Jewish thinking, the present age is evil. Although the perspective of Ephesians is more nuanced than the stark visions of the apocalypses, Paul too articulates the evil character of our current existence. In chapter 2, for example, he says we once “followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (2:2). Chapter 6 identifies our struggle in life as “not against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (6:12). Thus labeling the days as “evil” does not condemn the calendrical days as wicked but expresses the truth that our daily experience is filled with sin and dominated by the powers of darkness.

From the biblical point of view, evil does not reside only in those whose deeds score high on the index of terror and injustice. Rather, we all live in evil days. We all confront evil in our lives. We all are under the domination of evil. And we all live in a time when the battle between good and evil rages. Yet we are not captive or hopeless. Rather, when we acknowledge the evil of these days, we have a chance to do something profoundly good. We can redeem the time.

We do not “buy time” by paying some sort of ransom to the devil, as some interpreters have suggested. Rather, when we are watchful about how we live, when we use our time wisely, when we seize moments that might otherwise be wasted and fill them with wise deeds, we are redeeming time from its diabolical prison. Ironically, 5:16 speaks of redeeming or buying time

where we would talk about spending it. To use our English idiom, if we spend our time wisely, not wasting it on worthless or sinful activities, then that time will have been well invested.

Understand what the Lord's will is (5:17). Understanding the Lord's will does not in this context refer to knowledge of God's specific plans for our lives, as in the commonly asked question, "What is God's will for my life?" It means we begin to grasp the magnificent story of creation and redemption. We remember from Ephesians 1 that God "made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (1:9–10). Thus we will avoid folly and live wisely if we ground our living on the revealed will of God, especially his plan to unite all things in Christ.

Dimensions of Spirit-Filled Living (5:18–20)

Do not get drunk of wine, which leads to debauchery (5:18). Verse 18 contains the last of the three "not this ... but this" sentences in 5:15–20: "Do not get [p 184](#) drunk on wine [*mē methuskesthe oinō*], which leads to debauchery. Instead [*alla*], be filled with the Spirit." We cannot know for sure why Paul mentions drunkenness here. It may be that he was influenced by Proverbs 23:31, which in the Greek Septuagint reads, "Do not get drunk on wine [*mē methuskesthe oinō*], but [*alla*] talk with righteous people." It's possible that Paul wanted to discourage Christians from imitating pagan festivals that included inebriation. Or perhaps Paul like others in his day saw a certain similarity between drunkenness and spiritual inspiration. Philo, a first-century Jewish philosopher, notes in his treatise *On Drunkenness*, "Now when grace fills the soul, that soul thereby rejoices and smiles and dances, for it is possessed and inspired, so that to many of the unenlightened it may seem to be drunken, crazy and beside itself.... [I]ndeed, it is true that these sober ones are drunk in a sense." This is exactly what happened on the day of Pentecost when the first followers of Jesus were filled with the Spirit and some witnesses accused them of having had "too much wine" (Acts 2:14).

Whatever motivated Paul to forbid drunkenness, he adds a reason for this directive: drunkenness leads to "debauchery." The Greek word used here can also mean "dissipation" or "profligacy." Though these English terms sound overelaborate, Paul's readers knew what he meant. In the first-century Roman world, as in ours, abuse of alcohol led to folly, immorality, and all kinds of perversity.

Instead, be filled with the Spirit (5:18). The imperative "be filled with the Spirit" is in a passive form both in Greek and in English. Filling with the Spirit is not something we can do by our own power. Rather, the passive reveals God to be the agent who fills us with his Spirit through Christ, "who fills everything in every way" (1:23).

But if God does the filling, then how might we respond to the imperative "be filled with the Spirit"? Since we cannot fill ourselves with the Spirit through some magical formula, Paul is telling us to make ourselves available to God as vessels ready to be filled. We can worship him with openness to the Spirit. We can step out to minister in his name. The more we make ourselves available to God, the more we will be ready to be filled with his Spirit.

Another feature of the Greek imperative "be filled" does not show up in English. The Greek verb appears in the present tense, which signifies an ongoing action, not something that happens once and for all. In English we might represent this sense with "keep on being filled with the

Spirit.” By implication, p 185 the filling of the Spirit is something that can happen again and again in the life of the believer.

Elsewhere Paul teaches that we received the Spirit when we put our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (Rom 8:15). Yet we who have the Spirit can also be filled with the Spirit so that we might worship or minister with unusual power. Consider the analogy of breath (which is referred to in Greek as *pneuma*, the same word translated as “spirit”). In ordinary life, we have breath within us to keep us alive and well. Most of the time, we don’t even think about our breathing. But every now and then, we fill our lungs with extra breath, perhaps because we’re planning to swim underwater or because we’re hiking up a steep hill. In those unusual times, we are filled with *pneuma*. Similarly, there are times when God fills us with his *pneuma* so that we might serve him with extra vigor. The present imperative “keep on being filled with the Spirit” suggests that this is something that can and should happen often in our lives.

Speaking.... Sing and make music ... giving thanks.... Submit (5:18–21). Following the command to “be filled with the Spirit,” the Greek text of 5:18–21 contains several participles that are grammatically dependent on that imperative. English translations tend to obscure this relationship in order to make the English flow more naturally. Unfortunately, however, this hides the extent to which speaking (5:19), singing and making music (5:19), giving thanks (5:20), and submitting (5:21) are connected with being filled with the Spirit.

Greek grammar permits various options for understanding this relationship. The participles could be causal, “speaking, singing, etc., will cause you to be filled with the Spirit.” Or they could represent consequences of filling, “When you are filled with the Spirit, the result is that you will be speaking, singing, etc.” Commentators differ on which interpretation is best. Given the fact that the filling of the Spirit is something God does in freedom, it seems best to regard the participles as results or aspects of filling rather than the causes. But of course the filling of the Spirit often comes when Christians are speaking to each other, singing to the Lord, and so forth. Thus we should not limit too strictly the relationship between the participles and the imperative “be filled.”

Psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit (5:19). What are these various genres of music? Some commentators believe that psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit are distinct musical types. Others argue that Paul is simply stacking up words that overlap in meaning. I believe that psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit should not be seen as clearly defined, fully distinct musical genres, though each term may emphasize different qualities of music used in worship.

p 186 The word “psalms” (plural of Greek *psalmos*) points to the songs collected in the Old Testament book of Psalms (see for example, Luke 20:42), but may also include spontaneous songs inspired by the Spirit (see 1 Cor 14:26). “Hymns” (plural of Greek *hymnos*) appears only here and in a parallel passage in Colossians (3:16). But the use of the verb “to hymn” (*hymneō*) in the New Testament suggests the singing of a familiar, previously composed song of praise to God (see Matt 26:30; Acts 16:25). “Songs from the Spirit” (plural of *odē pneumatikē*) are perhaps spontaneous numbers sung in the context of Christian worship. Though we cannot identify the precise meaning of “psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit,” we do know that these are all musical forms used to praise God.

Speaking to one another (5:19). When filled with the Spirit, we will be “speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.” Yet aren’t songs of worship meant for

the Lord, as it says in the second half of verse 19? In what sense are we to speak to each other with these musical expressions?

One answer to this question points to the different audiences of music used in worship. Some songs address God directly (Psalm 75) while other songs of worship speak to people (Psalm 117:1—“Praise the Lord, all you nations.”). Thus we could easily speak to each other with the words of Psalm 117 and the like.

But when Paul urges us to speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, he may have had something more in mind. At several points in his writings, Paul appears to quote or paraphrase a song from early Christian worship; Philippians 2:5–11 would be a salient example. And just five verses earlier in Ephesians 5:14, Paul seems to do this very thing: “This is why it is said, ‘Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’” As we have seen, it’s likely that this is an excerpt from a song of early Christian worship. Thus the language of corporate worship fills Paul’s own letters in a way that models his exhortation to speak to each other in psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. The language of worship should spill over into our everyday conversation, shaping what we say and how we say it.

Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord (5:19). Moreover when we’re filled with the Spirit, we will also find ourselves singing and making music from our hearts “to the Lord” (5:19). Often the lyrics of our worship songs address God explicitly, as in the case of the classic hymn “How Great Thou Art.” Yet even if the words of our songs do not speak directly to God, we can still sing these songs for him. We don’t have to change “A Mighty Fortress [p 187](#) is Our God” to “A Mighty Fortress Art Thou, God” in order to praise God with this glorious hymn.

Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (5:20). This verse identifies one of the most common and appropriate expressions of worship: thanksgiving. Whether in song or speech, when we are filled with the Spirit, we will offer expressions of gratitude to God. We do this “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20), that is, under the authority of Christ and for his purposes. It does not mean that every prayer of gratitude must end with the words “in Jesus’ name,” though this practice can be a helpful reminder that all of our prayers should be offered under Christ’s lordship and for his sake.

Always (5:20). How should we thank God “always”? It’s unlikely that the Paul means giving intentional, verbal thanks every single waking moment. Surely there were times when his verbal skills were focused on something other than forming prayers of gratitude. I believe Paul meant at least two things when he said we should be “always giving thanks.” First, this verse encourages us to pause often in the midst of our busy lives to perceive God’s gifts and thank him for them. Second, Ephesians 5:20 urges us to develop an inner perspective of gratitude, to live each moment with an awareness of the blessings we have from God and our debt to him.

We may also wonder what it means to thank God “for everything.” Are we to thank the Lord for heresy and falsehood? For depression and death? For despair and darkness? Common sense suggests that we should not thank God for that which is contrary to God’s own will. In 1 John 1:5, for example, we read that “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” So if we thank God for moral and spiritual darkness, we are giving him false credit for that which is evil and risking outright blasphemy.

But we should also realize that apparently bad things turn out to be parts of God’s good plan. God even uses human evil for his providential purposes. In Genesis we read that Joseph suffered many terrible things, including attempted murder by his own brothers, being sold into slavery,

false accusation, abuse of power, and unwarranted imprisonment. As he was rotting in jail, Joseph may not have been ready to pray, “Lord, thank you that I am rotting in jail.” But in retrospect, Joseph saw how God used it for his own benefit, not to mention the benefit of his family and a whole nation. Thus, later in life Joseph said to the brothers who had once tried to kill him, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20).

There are times when we simply don’t know how to pray, when we’re not sure if the things happening to us are of God or are manifestations of [p 188](#) evil. In times like these, we may not know exactly how to thank God for everything. But even then we can still thank the Lord for his presence with us, for his compassion, for never leaving or forsaking us, for saving us from sin and death, and for giving us the sure hope of his future. We can thank God that nothing happens outside of the scope of his sovereignty and that he can and will use all things for his purposes. We can thank him that the most horrible action in all of history—the torture and murder of God’s own Son—turned out, in the mystery of his grace, to be the ultimate demonstration of divine love.

The final participle in the collection dependent on “be filled” is “submitting” (5:21). Though we will consider what this means in the next chapter, submitting to other people reminds us of the corporate context of Ephesians 5:15–20. Being careful how we live, redeeming the time, avoiding drunkenness, being filled with the spirit, speaking to one another with music for worship, singing and making music to the Lord, and giving thanks to God are functions of the Christian community. Yes, in the sovereignty of God we can be filled with the Spirit while we are alone. And, yes, we can sing to God in the privacy of our personal devotions. But in general, it is as members of the body of Christ that we are to walk in wisdom and be filled with the Spirit.

LIVE the Story

Redeeming the Time

According to a literal translation of Ephesians 5:16, we should watch carefully how we live, “redeeming the time, because the days are evil,” choosing to use well the time that is given to us, filling it with wise, godly actions rather than foolish, diabolical ones.

Most of us feel the evil of the days in which we live. We live in a world pervaded by ethnic violence, human trafficking, global terrorism, exploitative pornography, unjust economics, and entrenched racism. The oppressive evil of our time can debilitate us, discouraging us from trying to make a positive difference.

We can feel like Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Early in this novel by J. R. R. Tolkien, Frodo received a visit from Gandalf, the wise wizard. Frodo, an unassuming hobbit, had been given an evil ring of power. After sharing with Frodo the history of the ring, Gandalf observes that Sauron the Great, the Dark Lord, is growing in strength and wants the ring back. This placed Frodo in the crosshairs of evil, since he was responsible for the ultimate destruction of the ring. Understandably, Frodo was concerned.

[p 189](#) “I wish it need not have happened in my time,” says Frodo.

“So do I,” says Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us. Wise words, words that might well have been spoken by the apostle Paul. Words that were, I expect, shaped by Tolkien’s own Christian faith.

According to Ephesians, we too live in evil days. We have not been given a ring of power. But we have been entrusted with the good news of the gospel and called into a way of living that opposes the darkness of our world. When we say yes to Jesus, we join his battle against the forces of evil.

Like Frodo we might also say, “I wish it need not have happened in my time.” But we cannot choose to live in another time. We cannot skip immediately to the future when God reigns and all of creation is united under Christ.

Yet we do have a choice about how to live. We can choose to walk worthy of the calling with which we have been called (4:1). We can choose to be careful how we live, to walk wisely, and to redeem the time given to us (5:15–16). As we look at our lives and the world in which we live, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time given us.” Will we use it as the world dictates? Or will we liberate time from the clutches of evil and use it for God’s purposes? Will we, like Frodo, heed the call given to us and live for the sake of redemption?

Like Frodo, we are not alone in this effort. We also have a fellowship, not the fellowship of the ring but the fellowship of the Lord. He has joined us together in one body so that we might work jointly to fulfill his purposes on earth. As God’s people in community, we can redeem the time in ways we could not do by ourselves.

Consider, for example, the case of the First Presbyterian Church of Concord, California. Thirty years ago, the scourge of pornography manifested itself not on the yet-to-be-invented Internet but in countless “adult” bookstores and pornographic theatres. In Concord, a classic downtown theater was purchased by a company that turned it into a pornographic movie house. The “Showcase Theater” was adjacent to the First Presbyterian Church, which committed itself to shut down its evil neighbor.

There were many different ways for the church to “redeem the time” when it came to the blight in their neighborhood. They could have protested. They could have complained. They could have sought to change the laws to prevent a pornographic theater from adjoining a church. Yet what the church did was a more literal kind of redemption: they went out and bought the theater.

p 190 Ironically, for two years the church technically owned the theater as it continued to show “adult films” under the terms of the lease. The church had no other legal option. But once the lease ran out, the church converted the theater into the Presbyterian Community Center. Soon happier activities filled the space, including YMCA aerobics, Boy Scouts, a music academy, wheelchair soccer, and a counseling center. Twenty years later when those community groups found other places to function, the Presbyterians leased the facility to a Vineyard church, which, as of this writing, fills the former theatre with songs, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Literally, First Presbyterian Church redeemed the space, turning it from evil to good, “redeeming the time.” Also, it contributed in some small measure to God’s work of healing the cosmos through Christ, unifying all things in him.

Worship without Wars

About the same time the First Presbyterian Church of Concord was buying that pornographic theater, hundreds of Presbyterian churches throughout the United States, along with thousands of other churches, began to engage in what were called “worship wars.” The fight often pitted adherents of traditional Presbyterian worship against those who preferred contemporary praise music, such as that popularized by the Vineyard. To use the language of Ephesians, soldiers on one side fought for “hymns” while their opponents took up arms in favor of “songs from the Spirit.” Most of the time the battles took place within congregations, a civil war pitting worshiper against worshiper.

At the risk of oversimplifying matters, I believe that the worship wars could largely have been avoided if combatants on either side had paid closer attention to Ephesians 5:18–20. First of all, they would have noted that God’s people are supposed to worship with “psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.” Whatever these terms mean, they surely suggest that musical worship ought to include diverse genres and expressions. Those who wanted to sing only hymns or only songs could have recognized that their limited preferences were out of touch with Scripture. They could have chosen another way, the way of psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, the way of unity, the way of Christ.

I’ll never forget one battle of the worship wars that was fought by the elders of my church in Irvine. Several of them were advocating the inclusion of praise songs in our traditional worship services. Others were standing their ground in defense of cherished traditions. One of the staunchest advocates of traditional music was an elder named Tim. He sang in the choir and loved [p 191](#) the great hymns of the church. But as the battle of words continued in that board meeting, Tim began to have a change of heart. Finally, he said in his booming voice, “We all know how much I love traditional music in worship. I would prefer not to sing praise songs in our services. But I’ve decided that if using praise songs helps us draw high school kids into worship, if it allows us to reach even one kid for Christ, then I’ll vote for using both hymns and songs in our worship.” At that moment, the battle was over.

Notice that Tim was not motivated by these verses about singing “psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit” in worship. Rather, his heart was moved by the gospel, by the possibility of reaching out with the love of Christ, by the potential for greater unity and more faithful mission. When we are filled with the Spirit of God, we discover new passion for the things of God and less desire for our own things. You might say it was the vision of Ephesians 1 and 2 more than the musical inclusiveness of Ephesians 5 that captivated Tim’s spirit.

Another feature of Ephesians 5:18–20 helps put an end to worship wars. Verse 19 says: “Sing and make music from your heart *to the Lord*.” This reminds us that worship, though it edifies the body of Christ as well as individual members, is not primarily for us. Our worship is mainly for the Lord, for his glory and pleasure. If I’m preoccupied by my preference and pleasure in worship, then I’m missing the point.

One of the reasons my elder board was able to avoid a long and divisive worship war was that their notion of worship had been wisely shaped by Irvine Presbyterian Church’s first pastor, Ben Patterson. Ben spoke of worship with an analogy he borrowed from Søren Kierkegaard. This Danish philosopher taught that God was the true audience for worship. Congregation members

were the performers. Worship leaders were the prompters. And the true measure of any worship service is not whether I liked it or you liked it but whether God liked it.

If God is the true audience of worship, then our personal tastes lose their significance, not to mention their power to fuel battles over music in worship. Moreover, if God is the true audience of worship, and God appears to prefer psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, then who are we to fight for one genre against another?

Ephesians 5:18–20 enables us to prevent or to end worship wars as well as to move beyond them into a wise understanding and practice of worship. We recognize that our worship, in whatever genre, is primarily for God and God’s own pleasure. But we are also reminded by this passage that our worship allows us to serve and build up each other. When we let the words and reality of worship fill our minds and hearts, we will speak to each other with [p 192](#) psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. The content of our worship will enable us to speak the truth in love so that the body of Christ might grow up to become all that God intends it to be (4:15–16). Moreover, as the church worships in unity, the cosmos will see that God’s plan to unite all things in Christ is working.¹

¹ Mark D. Roberts, *Ephesians*, ed. Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 181–192.