

“Time Management”
Ephesians 5:15-21
May 3, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

I want us to focus our attention today on this phrase in verse 16, where Paul tells us to make **“the best use of the time.”** I realize that this whole idea of time management may cause some anxiety for many. It often comes to mean nothing more than how to cram more activity into less time. Perhaps I can ease your mind some by promising not to mention such things as multi-tasking or learning to be more efficient. I also promise not to scold you to work harder. What I do want to talk about, and what I believe Paul is talking about, is the need to use time to take advantage of the opportunities God gives us to be the kind of people he calls us to be. He says that we are to make “the best use of the time” (v. 16), or, as the NIV words it, “making the most of every opportunity.” This is not a verse about maximizing productivity by getting more done in less time. It is a verse about partnering with God by recognizing and acting upon the opportunities he has given us.

Let me say this a little differently. This is a verse about living life without regret. It is quite painful to look back on one’s life, see missed opportunities and be filled with regret about what has been missed. Young adults look back on opportunities for personal and academic development during schooling and regret that the time was frittered away in unimportant and sometimes harmful activities. Empty nesters see opportunities they had to help their children grow into mature young men and women, but they were too busy with selfish pursuits at work or in some hobby to devote themselves to their children. Older people who have lost physical vitality regret the use they made of their physical strength in their younger years. It is easy to look back on some of the foolish decisions of the past regarding our use of time and have regrets. Paul wants us instead to be wise and make good decisions about our use of time.

There is an old piece of Greek mythology about the youngest son of Zeus, named Caerus, from the Greek word for time, *kairos*. Two features of Caerus are of note in this discussion. First, he was very fast, which speaks of how quickly opportunity passes us by. Second, he had a forelock of hair on the front of his head, but was bald on the back. He had to be seized from the front; once he passed you by, it would be impossible to seize him. We in the south have a simpler way of speaking about this. We say that it does no good to close the barn door after the cows have gotten out. So as we look more carefully at this passage, let’s consider two questions related to this idea of making the most of the opportunities God gives us.

I. What Is at Stake in Our Use of Time?

Paul urges us to make the most of every opportunity **“because the days are evil.”** Paul is urging upon us a wartime mentality. We are like soldiers who are behind enemy lines. The enemy is Satan, and he has considerable influence over things in this world. Remember how Paul had said back in chapter 2 that Satan is **“now at work in the sons of disobedience”** (2:2). And he is going to add in the next chapter that we are fighting **“the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”** (6:12). We are like the children of Israel in the days of Nehemiah. Upon returning from their Babylonian captivity, they found Jerusalem’s walls torn down. Enemies were threatening from all around, and it was required that they take every opportunity to rebuild the walls before their enemies could muster an attack. Similarly, we must take advantage of every opportunity God gives to accomplish the work to which he calls us, because the enemy is afoot and lives are at stake.

This is why Paul opens this paragraph by telling his readers to “look carefully” how they walk. The Bible commonly describes our behavior in terms of walking. Picture a person walking barefoot on a sidewalk that is strewn with broken glass. In such a setting, every step is carefully planned so that the foot is planted only in places where there is no glass. To walk carelessly amongst broken glass would soon lead to a bleeding foot.

This metaphor of walking is a helpful one that teaches us at least two important truths about our use of time. It teaches us first about the importance of action. Walking is an action, and Christian behavior recognizes the importance of our actions. That is why application is so important. A critical question we should always be asking is the question of what step God is calling me to take. Once identified, then, the step needs to be taken. Let me tell you about a way this challenges me. Something I’ve noticed that what I tend to do is to think that I have fulfilled something God is calling me to do merely by intending to do it. So if I think God is calling me to spend some time pursuing a certain relationship, and if I acknowledge this call by purposing to do something about it, I can easily think that I have fulfilled this by intending to do so. What happens is that I keep it on the back burner, where it stays as something I intend to do but also something that I never quite manage to get around to doing. The result is a Christian life that is lived only in the area of intentions, and never gets translated to specific actions. While the Christian life is about more than our actions, it is not about less. The heart is the source of our words and actions, and Christianity changes us first at that heart level. But where there are no actions, there has been no real heart change. So one of the practices you might find helpful is never to add another intention to your list until you have taken steps regarding the previous intention. Such an action orientation will lead you to say “No” more frequently, because there is only so much time you have. But it is also a good expression of what it means to make the most of every opportunity.

A second truth stemming from this metaphor of the Christian life as a walk is that it is present-oriented. It is impossible to take more than one step at a time. The matter of importance in our Christian life is what we are doing in the present, not what we have or have not done in the past or what we might do in the future. We've just looked at the error we can make about the future, living with intentions about what we are going to do, so let's look now at the error we can make about the past. Those who live in the past are susceptible either to regret for past sins or nostalgia for the good ole days. Both will keep you from taking advantage of present opportunities, and both deny the truth of the gospel. If your heart is overwhelmed with regret, you need to remember the good news that Jesus has come to forgive us and cleanse us of past sins. While this forgiveness doesn't remove the consequences of our past sin, it does allow for a fresh start each day, with the promise that our loving Father will use even the bitter consequences of our sin to our good and his glory. It is good news that we are no longer defined by past sin and failure. The other wrong view of the past is the nostalgic view that sees the past through rose-colored glasses. Such a view leads us to be overly negative about the present. If we think that only the past was good and the present is hopeless, then we will not take advantage of opportunities available to us in the present. It is a denial of the gospel because it assumes that God can't be trusted for the present, only the past. So God calls us to take advantage of present opportunities because so much is at stake.

II. What Is Required to use Time Appropriately?

Two things are required if we are to use time appropriately. The first is to **“understand what the will of the Lord is”** (v. 17). What does he mean? Theologians speak of the will of God in two senses. There is the revealed will of God that we have in the Bible. It is God's will that his children trust him and obey him. The Bible tells us so. But there is another sense of God's will that the Scriptures speak of. It is the specific plan of God for his individual children. It was God's will that I marry Wendy Strassner and that she marry me.

Which sense of God's will is Paul talking about here—the revealed will of God in the Bible or the specific plan God has for each of his children? I believe it is both. It is essential that we know the revealed will of God so we can please God. But we must also know the will of God in the sense of the unique role he has for us. God doesn't call us to do everything. Just because a need exists doesn't mean that God is calling you to do something about it. In order to take advantage of every opportunity, you have to say “No” to a large number of things. We refuse to do the good things that God hasn't called us to do in order to be able to do those things he has called us to do. I get requests all the time about things people would like me to do. They are almost always good things. Most of them I can't do because it would lead me to neglect the things God has

called me to do. He has called me to pastor this congregation, ministering the Word of God both publicly and privately, praying for this congregation and leading it in following God. My unique role in God's kingdom is to minister the word, to pray and to lead. What's more, if I don't do these things, no one will. I have a unique role to play that God has given to me alone. This is true of me not because I'm a pastor, but because I'm a child of his. The same is true of you. You have a unique role to play, a calling God has given to you alone. There are people you are uniquely qualified to reach. So when Paul tells us here to understand what the will of the Lord is, he is telling us to know what pleases God and to know the unique role he has given to you.

The balance of this paragraph speaks of a second thing needed in order for us to make the most of our God-given opportunities. We must be filled with the Spirit in order to have the right goal and to pursue that goal. The way we decide to use our time will inevitably be guided by our chief aim in life. Since I took up bike riding as a hobby a few years ago, I have met people whose chief aim is to ride as fast and far as they can. Both their time and money is put in service of this goal. Others want more money or more beauty or more friends, and they will devote their time to the pursuit of these goals. What is the goal we are called to have, and toward which we devote our time? We want to be filled with the Spirit instead of being filled with ourselves.

Let me point out a few things about this filling of the Spirit. For one thing, I note that it is a command. If we are not being filled with the Spirit, we are sinning against God. Also, it is a command that is in the passive voice, meaning that it is something that is done to us and not by us. God fills us; we don't fill ourselves. It is contrasted here with being drunk. To be inebriated is to lose control of ourselves, while to be filled with the Spirit is to have our self-control heightened. Remember that self-control is listed in Galatians as a fruit of the Spirit. When we are filled with the Spirit, we think more clearly and we feel more deeply. In the Old Testament, God appointed a man by the name of Bezalel to make the furnishings for the tabernacle. He was filled with the Spirit in order that he would possess **“skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts”** (Ex. 31:3).

As we are filled with the Spirit, the result will be the four things indicated by the participles of verses 19-21. We will address one another in song, we will sing praise to the Lord, we will give thanks to the Lord and we will submit to one another. Verse 19 is clearly talking about our corporate public worship as it urges us to sing both to one another and to the Lord. The last two speak of trusting God as we give thanks to him and submit to the relationships he has brought into our lives. In short, we can summarize these by saying that they call us to love and trust God and to love one another. That's the Great Commandment, isn't it? We are to love God with all our minds and hearts and to love our neighbor as ourself. That is the goal to which we should devote our time. Our goal isn't to become as efficient as possible, nor to be as comfortable

or successful as possible, but to be as loving as possible through the filling of the Holy Spirit. Our time should be devoted to that goal.

So how is it that we obey this command to be filled with the Spirit? For one thing, we are to pray with faith for the Spirit. In his teaching about prayer, Jesus urged us to pray for the Spirit, saying that the Father will give us the Spirit just as earthly fathers give bread to their children. He is telling us to pray with faith. Let me try to deepen our faith by pointing out that when God fills us with his Spirit, he is pouring his life into us. The very nature of the Trinity is that each member, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all live to give themselves to the other. None lives for himself and all live for the other. God is here inviting us into that fellowship. He pours himself out for us, and asks us to join him by pouring ourselves out for him. We ask in faith for the Spirit as we say the words we will be singing at the conclusion of our service. "All for Jesus! All for Jesus! All my being's ransomed powers, all my thoughts and words and doing, all my days and all my hours."

So we must pray in faith for the filling of the Spirit. Then, I believe we must begin to act in faith toward the realization of these qualities indicated by the participles. So we act in faith to be present in corporate worship, loving others and loving God. We act in faith to submit to God through giving thanks to him in all circumstances. We also submit to God in the circumstances he brings into our lives through other people, even the challenging people. That's what he goes on to talk about in the next three sections. This submission is an important part of making the most of opportunity. It is often the case that the opportunities God presents to us come through difficult challenges with people. The conflict you have with a co-worker is the opportunity God gives you if you will pray and be filled with the Spirit.

CONCLUSION:

Is God calling you to take some action in order to make the most of God-given opportunities? In his book, *First Things First*, Stephen Covey tells about a time management seminar he once attended where the presenter pulled out a large glass jar and filled it to the top with some fist-sized rocks. He then asked the class if they thought the jar was full, and they all said it was. He then pulled out a bucket of small gravel and poured it into the jar to the very top, and asked the same question. They were beginning to catch on and said, "Probably not." He then took a bag of sand and poured it to the top and asked the same question. By now, they all knew it wasn't full. Finally, he took out a pitcher of water and filled it to the top. He then asked, "What's the point of this demonstration?" Someone said, "Well, there are gaps, and if you really work at it, you can always fit more into your life." "No," he said, "that's not the point." The point is that you have to put the big rocks in first." For Christians, the big rocks are to be filled with the Spirit so we can love God and others.