

Spirit-Led Life Together – Ephesians 5:15-21

Five Points Community Church (5/24/15) Brett Toney

When I was in Cameroon last summer, I got talking about this passage with one of the nationals who was helping us with travel arrangements around the country. He was convinced that this passage calls for Christians to abstain from drinking alcohol. After talking for some time about it, he couldn't be persuaded otherwise. Now while that is a good question of application related to this passage, that is not what Paul is addressing. His point is not about how Christians relate to *alcohol* but rather how we relate to *others*. That relational emphasis is what he has been getting at throughout these chapters as he fleshes out what a gospel-centered life looks like—it looks like unified relationships with other Christians. And here in our passage this morning, that specifically looks like walking wisely in Spirit-led life together.

Walk Wisely: Don't Waste Your Life (v.15-16)

At v.15 Paul resumes the idea of the Christian life that he has been calling for in two chapters. In being called to look carefully how we walk, Paul is bringing us back to things he has already said about our walk, our Christian life. Chapter 5:2—we walk in Christ-like, self-sacrificing love; 4:17—we walk not in the futility of sin; 4:1—we walk worthy of our calling in Christ. The added nuance we get here in 5:15 is the intentionality with which we are to walk, “Look *carefully* then how you walk.” It's a rocky path. There are tree roots sticking up to catch your toe on. It will be easy to veer off the path. So watch out! This isn't a nice walk on the beach—it's a trek through all kinds of terrain.

If you aren't paying attention, you aren't going to walk all that well. So your life in Christ needs to be marked by wisdom. You need to know what the task the risen Lord Jesus has given you, and you need to pursue it. Christian, you have a calling to which you have been called, so

lace up your boots and get after it. You have been called in Christ to see to the building up of the body of Christ that we all might attain maturity in Christ.

If we go about our calling foolishly, we will have wasted our lives. Paul doesn't want that. That's why he exhorts us to walk wisely by "making the best use of the time." Our time is short. "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away" (Psalm 90:10). The days are short for when God calls us home or Christ comes in glory. So we must walk wisely, not wasting our lives but losing them; Jesus said this is the call of discipleship, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39).

It is necessary for us to use every opportunity to walk wisely "because the days are evil" (v.16b). Christian, you can risk neither playing with sin nor avoiding sinners because the days are evil. The 21st century is not more evil than the 1st century—all the days are evil until Christ returns. Sin lurks to seek and destroy and divide and devour. You must not flirt with sin in any form—that is walking as unwise, being unaware of the radical, identity-transforming truths of Christ. The days are evil and sin seeks to suck you in to such evil.

Likewise, you must not squander opportunity to commend Christ to sinners. Don't spend twenty hours a week watching TV. Push back against the social norm of reaching for your phone at every break in the conversation or spare moment. Don't neglect your family or relationships in order to read theology books for hours on end. *In the providence of God, people have been brought in to your life that you would not waste it but lose it for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.* Look up and see who the Lord has placed right beside you that you would see to it they walk wisely with you. Commentator Harold Hoehner had an insightful observation here, "It is interesting to notice that [Paul] is not recommending that [the Ephesian church] *fear* the present

evil age or *avoid* interaction with it. Rather his exhortation is to walk wisely *in* the evil days by seizing every opportunity” (emphasis added).¹ We do not fear; the Church is on the offensive, storming the gates of Hell, which shall not prevail (cf. Matthew 16:18). We do not avoid but take every opportunity to point to the wisdom of God, a crucified and risen Savior (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:22-23).

Spirit-Led: Pursue the Spirit’s Work (v.17-18)

But how is it that we walk wisely? Verse 17, we walk wisely by not becoming foolish but understanding what is the will of the Lord. These are commands, imperatives; “Don’t become foolish. Understand Christ’s will!” And just as Paul is emphasizing our life together as the body of Christ in these chapters, so also does he have in view Christ’s will for the *community*. This command is not that you as an individual must know who to marry or where to go to college or whether or not to accept that job or how many kids to have. That is not what is *necessary* to walk wisely. No, Peter O’Brien explains, “The ‘will of God’ [in Paul’s letters] 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.”² Walk wisely by understanding God is saving and creating a new *people*, a new *community*, in the likeness of Christ. Or, walk wisely by understanding chapters 1-3. Or, walk wisely by being filled by the Spirit. Three ways of saying the same thing.

In v.18, we come to the third, parallel “not this but this” statement—do not be unwise, foolish, drunk, *but* be wise, understand, filled by the Spirit. Each statement further explains the previous. So Paul’s command to not get drunk with wine is a practical example of what unwise fools do. Getting drunk—and by implication, by any alcoholic beverage and not *just* wine (don’t

¹ Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians*, (Baker Academic, 2002) 695.

² Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Eerdmans, 1999) 386.

try to be a legalistic weasel and think it's permissible to get drunk by drinking beer)—getting drunk is *an* indicator that you are not walking wisely, understanding, or being filled by the Spirit. Paul could have used a number of examples here but used a common one. He could have said, “Don’t get high or strung out, but be filled by the Spirit.” The idea is that Christians walking worthy of their calling are not controlled by *substances* but by the *Spirit* of God.

In this final positive exhortation, Paul commands this local church to “be filled by the Spirit.” It’s kind of an odd command because it’s in a *passive, present verb form*. Try to remember your grade school grammar. It’s passive, meaning it’s not like “Go clean your room” but “Be sprayed down with the hose”; it’s a command to have something done *to you*. And it’s present, indicating that it should be an ongoing reality; “Continue being filled by the Spirit.” Walking wisely and understanding Christ’s purposes in redeeming and sanctifying a people will look like that people living in a continual state of the Spirit’s positive influence on them. Our identity and character will be transformed by the Spirit, not by some substance.

Now almost every English translation says what the ESV says here, “be filled with the Spirit.” This would indicate that the Spirit of God is the *content* of the filling, that the Spirit himself is the water going into the glass. However, commentators are in agreement that the grammar cannot mean that. Rather, the Spirit is the *means* or *agent* of the filling; he is the one pouring the water into the glass. Just like wine is the means of bringing about drunkenness, so also the Spirit is the means of bringing about fullness. Paul is commanding that believers be filled with something *by* the Spirit.

So what is the something? What are we to be filled *with*? Remember what Paul has told us already about being filled. That’s what he prayed for in 3:19, that we would “be filled with all the fullness of God.” And in 4:10, he tells us that it is *Christ* who will “fill all things.” So here in

v.18, we come to a Trinitarian climax. Christians are to be filled *by* God the Son, *through* the work of God the Spirit, *with* all the fullness of God the Father.³ The Triune God is at work to see that we are united together in himself.

But what is “the fullness”? It’s best to understand “all the fullness of God” as the perfectly realized, redeemed image of God—full Christian maturity and Christlikeness.⁴ Paul wants you to walk wisely by being solely led by the Holy Spirit in order that you attain full maturity in Christ. And this will happen together, in community and conjunction with other believers. But just as Paul didn’t leave us with the general “walk wisely” or “understand” but offered the specific of “don’t get drunk,” he doesn’t leave us with the general “be filled by the Spirit.” From v.19 through 6:9, Paul gives concrete examples of what the Christian community—what a local church—looks like when they are walking wisely being led by the Spirit into full maturity in Christ.

Life Together: Live This Kind of Life Together (v.19-21)

Paul lists four things in particular that will mark Christians who are being filled by the Spirit, who are growing in Christlikeness: addressing, singing, thanksgiving, submitting. These are the results of the Spirit moving in and on a people, conforming them evermore so into the image of Christ. What Paul is describing here is what a gospel-centered community looks like when they are walking wisely, being led by the Spirit. He wants us to live this kind of life together.

The first two are related in their musical nature. When the Spirit does his filling work, we will be a singing people. The distinction between the two is the horizontal and vertical orientation. When the Spirit fills us with all of God’s fullness, we will address “one another in

³ See the footnote on Eph 5:18 in the NET Bible for a brief explanation, available for free at net.bible.org.

⁴ See the discussion about this in Hoehner (704) and O’Brien (392).

psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” The word for “addressing” is more literally “speaking.” But they are *songs* we are speaking, so “addressing” or “communicating” fits well. This is the horizontal orientation. When we come together in corporate worship on Sunday mornings, this is why we sing together. We sing *to each other* with these songs. Our singing is not just worship to God but edification to one another. Paul puts it more bluntly in Colossians 3:16 when he says this kind of singing is *how* we teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.

So when the worship team leads us in a song that perhaps you don’t really care for, sing! You’re not singing it only for you! Sing that song in Christ-like love, laying down your own preferences, *to* the rest of us here. Your singing is for *our* good. You are a part of this body, so be filled by the Spirit resulting in your addressing of the rest of us in song. In the broader Church, I am so grateful for both the increase in focus on congregational singing and the writing of theologically rich and musically stirring songs. Sovereign Grace, Chris Tomlin, the Gettys and others are equipping us to do this well. They are building on the Psalms and excellent hymn writers throughout the centuries.

But our singing also has a vertical orientation. A sign of Christian maturity is singing to the Lord with your heart. So you sing to one another and to the Lord. But don’t just go through the motions. Don’t just stand and mouth the words to the songs we sing, biding time until the sermon ... or lunch. Sing *with your heart*. O that the grandeur and wonder of God would fall upon you afresh, and your heart would be overcome with love, joy, adoration, and awe that it spills forth in fervent singing. God is not merely after your obedience but your joy! Engage your affections in the worship of God. Feel deeply according to the truths we sing.

And if you’re not there, pray. Ask God for the Spirit to do his filling that you would sing like this. And until he does, sing! Our singing together *to each other* is a means that God uses to

bring about this kind of singing with your heart. This just happened to me a couple weeks ago. JJ and I were standing up here singing the final song in the service. For whatever reason I was just not feeling it. Then I hear him singing beside me and see out of the corner of my eye how engaged he is and moved by the song that the Spirit moved on me to sing with my heart.

The third mark Paul lists of the Spirit's filling work is thanksgiving. This isn't just easy picking, run-of-the-mill thanks. When the Spirit fills you with the fullness of God, gratitude will be the decided tone of your life. That's why Paul says "giving thanks *always* and for *everything*." This is related to the secret Paul learned and the "all things" he can do through Christ who strengthens him. In Philippians, he talks about this secret and "all things"—he's talking about contentment. He's learned to be content in all things and so he can endure all things. He's content, I would argue, because he is grateful, because he gives thanks always and for everything. Whatever the situation, the decided tone of his life is gratitude.

This doesn't mean that you give thanks to God for the terrible things that happen in your life. Saying, "I thank God for my cancer, the death of a loved one, ongoing struggle against sin" is not what he means as the mark of the Spirit's work. Rather, an abiding attitude of gratitude to God for the sustaining grace in your life is a mark of his work. Paul was not necessarily grateful for being brought low or for facing hunger and need. He was grateful to have a God who preserves and keeps his blood-bought people through any circumstance or trial. God will sustain you and see you through, and so you can give thanks always and for everything.

The final result of the Spirit's filling listed here is that the local church is marked by "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." Paul will go on to explain in more detail what this looks like in the relationships of marriage, family, and work in the following verses. But because of the specific examples he offers, we know that v.21 does not mean that everyone

in the church submits to everyone else in the same way. That's impossible. That would be like when you're in the car and you ask your spouse, "So where do you want to go for dinner?" And she says, "Oh, wherever you want." And you reply, "Well, I want to go where *you* want. So where do you want to go?" And she says, "Wherever." At some point, some one has to no longer submit their desires to the other; someone has to say, "Ok. We're going to Culver's."

So when Paul says that a mark of the Spirit's work among us is that we are submitting to one another, he can't mean that we submit *in the same way* to one another. The relationships of authority and submission will look different, but the key is that there are such God-ordained structures in our relationships. Our God is a God of order, and he has ordained such relationships of authority and submission in the church, home, and society. None are autonomous or have ultimate authority except for Christ—he is *the* authority. That is why our submitting is related to our reverence or fear of him. We submit to those Jesus has put in authority over us—such as husbands, fathers, and bosses—because we know ultimately that we are in submission to him as our Sovereign Lord.

Triune Communion & the Lord's Table

Paul wants us to walk wisely in Spirit-led life together, addressing one another in song, singing with our hearts, giving thanks in all circumstances, and faithfully submitting to those God has put in authority over us. But as we turn our focus to the Lord's Table, note the additional reference to the Trinity in v.18 & 20. By the filling work of the Spirit of God, you give thanks to the Father God in the authority and on the basis of the Son of God. Our experience of gospel-centered community is radically based upon and informed by the experience of community enjoyed by the Triune God for all eternity. God has always been in community as the Father, Son, and Spirit, and the three Persons have enjoyed and loved one another forever. It is

this Triune community that our community is derived from; because God is in communion, so we are in communion with each other. And because God is in communion, we are folded into that Triune relationship of love through the work of Christ and the filling of the Spirit.

So as we come to the Table, remember that we come *together*. We come as a unified community in Christ. So before you receive the bread and cup from this Table, which serves us as a reminder of the sacrifice of Christ that was made on the altar of God, be reconciled in unity. If you remember that you have something against your brother or that he has something against you, go to him and be reconciled (cf. Matthew 5:23-24). Then come and enjoy a foretaste of the communion we will enjoy with the Triune God together forever.