Walking Wisely

Believers are to walk wisely, depending on the Holy Spirit for direction.

Ancient Israel’s King Solomon was renowned for having God-given wisdom. He composed some three thousand proverbs and more than a thousand songs (1 Kings 4:29-34). His name is associated with three Old Testament books known as wisdom literature—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. Wisdom in biblical terms refers to having insight and judgment to make good, godly decisions on a consistent basis. Wisdom focuses on the application of experience and knowledge so that the results are beneficial.

The Book of Proverbs stands the test of time in this regard. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, reveals that human wisdom has its limits. The writer of Ecclesiastes complained about the seeming meaninglessness of life “under the sun”—that is, from a worldly perspective. The end of Ecclesiastes states that “the conclusion of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commands, because this is for all humanity” (Eccl. 12:13). In other words, while human wisdom can be beneficial, it cannot substitute for God’s revealed wisdom.

In Ephesians 5:15-21, the apostle Paul urged New Testament believers to live as wise people. Paul knew that the Lord is the source of all true wisdom. The vocabulary of wisdom is sprinkled throughout Paul’s letters. In Ephesians, for example, he mentioned wisdom three times, and all of the instances refer to God as the Author of wisdom:

• God poured out the riches of His grace along “with all wisdom and understanding” (1:8).
• Paul prayed for the Father to give believers “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation” (1:17).
• God’s “multi-faceted wisdom” is made known even in the heavens through the church (3:10).

Paul realized as well that true wisdom must be applied properly. That is why he urged the Ephesians to live as wise people, a central theme of this session. Paul knew that it was one thing to know all about wisdom (as Solomon did), but it is another thing entirely to apply wisdom consistently, to live day by day in the Spirit as a spiritually wise person.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 5:15-21

This is the fifth session in which we have considered Paul’s practical application of the doctrinal teaching he wrote about in Ephesians 1–3. In those first three chapters, Paul emphasized God’s initiative in providing the way of salvation through faith in Christ for both Jews and Gentiles. God established the church as Christ’s body, the redeemed people of God.

The implications of these doctrinal truths, as the titles of recent sessions indicate, focus on how we “walk”—that is, carry out our daily lives—as believers. The following is a brief review of the titles and emphases.

- Walking Together (4:1-10)—As believers, we are to be unified with other believers in our actions.
- Walking Forward (4:11-16)—God-given (and gifted) leaders help us mature as Christians and minister in and through the church.
- Walking Differently (4:17-32)—As believers, we are empowered and expected to live unlike we lived before conversion; we are to put off the old self.
- Walking in Love (5:1-14)—As believers, we are to be Christlike (imitating God) and live as children of light in a sin-darkened world.

In this session’s Bible passage (5:15-21), Paul focused on the expectation that believers will live wisely. As he had stated previously in his letter, Paul asserted that true wisdom comes from God. God freely gives His wisdom to believers in their relationship with Christ. Still, they must utilize godly wisdom each day in the power and guidance of the indwelling Spirit.

Paul’s consistent use of plural verbs in these verses is worth noting. The apostle understood that Christians do better at living wisely when they do so in community with other believers. As you and your study group explore these verses in the Letter to the Ephesians, pray that the Spirit will guide all of you to perceive what it means not only to live wisely as an individual believer but also to live wisely together as God’s redeemed, holy people.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

BE WISE (Eph. 5:15-17)

Paul warned the recipients of his letter about the need to be wise and careful in all things, including in their use of time. Believers are responsible to seek to live each day according to God’s will.
VERSE 15

Pay careful attention, then, to how you live—not as unwise people but as wise—

To highlight his upcoming focus on important life application, Paul inserted the word then (sometimes translated as “therefore”). The Greek verb rendered pay ... attention can be literally understood as an exhortation to see, examine closely, or study carefully. In some cases, the term promotes an even stronger reaction, that of watching out for (and thus avoiding) something that is dangerous or destructive (see Phil. 3:2).

Here in Ephesians 5:15, Paul used the verb in the sense of attending to an important matter that might otherwise be neglected. He emphasized this meaning by adding the word rendered careful. In some areas of life—family, job, education, appearance—most people take care to attend to them, because these things matter. Believers must take the same approach to their spiritual growth and Christian living; these matters do not happen automatically. Carelessness is never an acceptable option for believers.

The verb rendered you live could carry both a literal and a figurative meaning. Literally, the verb referred to walking about on one’s feet (Matt. 4:18). Paul and other New Testament writers began to use the verb as an analogy for daily life—in other words, the believer’s lifestyle. In Ephesians, Paul consistently used the verb in this sense of “to live” (see 2:2,10; 4:1,17; 5:2,8). Ephesians 5:15 is the final time the apostle used the term in this epistle. To Paul, the way believers carried out their daily lives mattered greatly.

The apostle went on to give a general guideline about the way in which believers are to live: not as unwise people but as wise. Just because persons know about wisdom does not necessarily mean they are living wisely. Even though believers might understand that God is the Author of true wisdom, they might—through carelessness—get drawn into living unwisely.

VERSE 16

making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

Paul pointed out that the first mark of living wisely as believers was to make wise use of time. The apostle recognized that time ultimately belongs to God alone. He graciously gives each person who lives a brief slice of it—brief, that is, relative to the entirety of time. Thus, we as believers in particular should realize that God regards us as stewards of the time we receive. And as stewards (or managers), we are accountable to God for how we use our time. The Greek root word rendered making the most of literally means “to buy back, to redeem.” It could also have the sense of using something to the fullest extent.
In New Testament Greek, there were two commonly used words that referred to two aspects of time. One of the terms (Greek, *chronos* [KROH nahs]) referred to chronological time, the passing of time increments that are measured on a clock or calendar. The second word for time (Greek *kairos* [KIGH rahs], referred to a season, a right (or wrong) time for something, or a timely set of circumstances (that is, an opportune time). Paul used the latter term in Ephesians 5:16. Thus, he urged Christians to think of their daily lives not just in terms of days and years but also as their opportunity to live for God and make a gospel impact on the world around them. The right time for Christian living is now. Believers must not wish for or wait for a more opportune time.

The apostle provided a strong incentive for the believer’s making use of every opportunity: **the days are evil.** It isn’t difficult to understand why Paul considered his time as evil. He was unjustly confined as a prisoner in Rome. Further, he was fully aware of the immoral pagan excesses that plagued not only Rome but also other cities of the empire such as Ephesus.

Today, most—if not all—believers would admit that our time is no less plagued by evil as Paul’s time was. In addition to the same immoral excesses of the first century, we grapple with a whole host of possible “time thieves” the world puts in front of us: everything from technology-driven pastimes (social media and gaming come to mind) to idle chatter. If we as believers do not discipline our minds for godliness in these evil days, then this evil time will keep us from godliness. Paul may very well have been thinking about Psalm 90:12 in his exhortation to believers: “Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts.”

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Time, Meaning of” on pages 1571–1572 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How careful are you to make the most of your time? Reflect on possible thieves of time that hinder your Christian life. What changes should you consider making?

**VERSE 17**

So don’t be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

In Ephesians 5:15, Paul contrasted the positive term “wise” to the negative term “unwise.” In verse 17, he interjected a term synonymous with “unwise”—**foolish**. Readers of the Book of Proverbs will recall how often Solomon and other writers of proverbs contrasted the ways of the wise to the ways of the foolish. (See the personification of wisdom and folly in Prov. 9.)
In the New Testament, the concept of foolishness referred to being without good moral sense. Thus, Paul introduced the second mark of living wisely with the words don’t be foolish. Then he went on to issue a positive challenge for believers: understand what the Lord’s will is. Fools choose their own will; wisdom is found in doing the will of God, just as Jesus prayed (Mark 14:36). Further, Jesus taught His followers to approach God in prayer with “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10b-11a). Can anything be more important to a believer than discovering and doing God’s will? Paul said no.

Christian theologians refer to two aspects of God’s will that are taught in Scripture. First, there is the aspect of God’s general will. Many parts of God’s will are the same for all of His people regardless of their time in history, location, background, and so forth. Today the primary source for discerning His general will is Scripture. His Word reveals His will for His people. In this vein, Paul wrote such admonitions as “This is God’s will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality” (1 Thess. 4:3) and “Give thanks in everything; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18).

A second aspect of God’s will is what theologians refer to as His “particular will” for individuals. For example, an individual believer might seek God’s will concerning whether and whom to marry, what career or occupation to pursue, where to live, and many other personal matters. While Scripture provides some general principles that guide us in making such decisions, wise believers also pursue specific guidance into God’s will through prayer and the counsel of mature believers. On one hand, Paul knew that God’s will included the plan for all people groups to be evangelized and discipled in the gospel (Matt. 28:18-20). On the other hand, he prayed about God’s specific timing for him to travel to Rome and preach (Rom. 1:10; 15:32).

BE FILLED (Eph. 5:18)

Paul urged all believers to be controlled by the Spirit, not by foolish influences that lead to reckless living.
And don’t get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit:

As we study Paul’s teaching in this verse about the Christian’s relationship to the Holy Spirit, we need to keep in mind several facets of the overall biblical teaching on this matter. First, so far in his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul had assured believers they were “sealed … with the promised Holy Spirit” (1:13) and yet were to be careful not to “grieve God’s Holy Spirit” (4:30). Being sealed by the Spirit assures believers not only of the Spirit’s indwelling presence but also of their eternal hope of heaven. Being warned about grieving the Spirit reminds believers that sanctification (spiritual growth) is a process, a day-by-day, situation-by-situation work of the Spirit in each believer’s life.

Second, biblical writers used phrases such as “full of the Spirit” and “filled with the Spirit” to refer to believers who consistently submit their whole lives to the Spirit and obey His guidance. The fullness of the Spirit is not a dramatic “second blessing” type of experience needed for a deeper spiritual walk; rather—as Paul affirmed in this verse—it is something that all Christians may (and should) experience simply by yielding to the Spirit on a daily basis.

Third, other than Paul’s command in this verse, the only other specific references to the filling or fullness of the Holy Spirit are found in Luke’s two writings, Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts. Here are some samples:

- John the Baptist’s parents were both filled with the Spirit (Luke 1:41,67);
- John the Baptist and Jesus were full of the Spirit (Luke 1:15; 4:1);
- The early church as a group received a fresh filling with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 4:31; 13:52);
- The first seven deacons in the church—Stephen in particular, were described as being full of the Spirit (Acts 6:3,5; 7:55).

With these three observations as a background, let us turn now to consider Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 5:18. Paul began with a negative command: don’t get drunk with wine. He referred to wine because it was one of the most commonly available fermented drinks available to first-century people. Perhaps some of the Ephesian believers had problems with drunkenness before their conversions to faith in Christ.

By extension, we can also apply Paul’s prohibition regarding drunkenness to numerous other types of addictive substances today. The underlying problem Paul addressed was the loss of control over one’s thinking and acting. A person who is drunk (or under the influence of illicit drugs) is controlled by that substance. Believers are to be under the Spirit’s control.

Drunkenness easily leads to reckless living (“excess,” KJV; “debauchery,” ESV; NIV). The Greek term rendered reckless living could refer to uncontrolled
actions as well as wastefulness. When strong drink takes over, good judgment and propriety usually fly away.

Several truths arising from Paul’s command for believers to be filled by the Spirit deserve attention:

• First, this is a command for all believers, not a suggestion for some. The only way for us successfully to pay attention to how we live (5:15) is by following the Spirit’s control daily.

• Second, the verb rendered be filled is in a Greek tense (present tense) that emphasizes ongoing action. Thus, the command can be understood as “keep on being filled.” Living in the fullness of the Spirit is meant to be the Christian’s regular pattern of living.

• Third, the verb not only is in the present tense but also is in the passive voice. This means that the One actually doing the filling is not the believer but the Holy Spirit. As believers, we can yield to the Spirit and obey His control, but only He can fill us. He does so as we keep on yielding and obeying.

• Fourth, Paul did not say that when we are filled that we somehow get more of the Spirit. The Spirit is a Person, and we either have His indwelling presence (believers) or we do not (unbelievers). To be filled by the Spirit actually means that the Spirit gets more of the believer’s heart and will. We submit more of our lives to His daily control.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the verses from Luke and Acts mentioned on page 115. What evidence showed that a believer was filled with the Spirit? How was the individual’s behavior affected? In what areas do you need to submit more of yourself to the Spirit’s daily control?

BE GENUINE (Eph. 5:19-21)

Paul identified actions that result from the believer’s being filled with the Spirit. Results include singing and speaking God’s Word, having an attitude of thanksgiving, and submitting to other believers.

VERSE 19

speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord,

Many Bible students have noticed a number of similar passages in the two epistles Paul sent to the believers in Ephesus and Colossae. This session’s
Bible passage is one such example. When we compare Ephesians 5:19-21 with Colossians 3:16-17, the parallels are striking. However, in the Colossians passage, Paul pointed to results that come when Christians “let the word of Christ dwell richly” in them (Col. 3:16). As we have seen in Ephesians 5:18, those results come as believers live in the fullness of the Spirit. Thus, we can conclude that Paul saw little distinction between keeping oneself saturated in God’s Word and seeking to live by the Spirit. These two spiritual realities go hand in hand.

As noted in the final paragraph of the “Understand the Context” feature in this session, Paul used numerous plural verbs in Ephesians 5:15-21. This fact strongly suggests Paul understood that believers do better at living the Spirit-filled life when they do so in community with other believers. Thus, when the apostle noted the first such result, speaking to one another, he probably had in mind the speaking opportunities that occurred at the church’s worship gatherings. One of the hallmarks of the Spirit’s unifying work is genuine fellowship being practiced among believers.

What speaking opportunities did Paul have in mind? He mentioned psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. By psalms, Paul likely was referring to the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament. Such Scripture texts could be read aloud, chanted, or sung. The term rendered hymns probably describes Christian songs of praise directed to God or Christ. (See Phil. 2:6-11; Rev. 4:11; 5:9-10,12-13 for possible examples of Christian hymns.) The term spiritual songs may refer to other kinds of Christian songs that describe the experiences of God’s people.

If the first result of Spirit-filled living is fellowship (speaking to one another), the second result is genuine worship. Paul next spoke of utterances addressed to the Lord. Singing and making music have been features of Christian worship gatherings from the beginning (Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; 1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16; Jas. 5:13). While the styles of singing and making music have certainly changed through the generations, the worship practices themselves continue unabated. Paul wanted Christian singing to be done with the heart. Singing from the heart is an expression of Christian joy.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Hymn” on page 782 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. As you think about singing in a Christian worship gathering, to what extent do you value singing from the heart as more important than the style of singing? What has shaped your personal preferences in worship music? Are you able to appreciate other styles?
Verse 20

giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

To this point, Paul noted that fellowship and worship are marks of Spirit-filled believers. Now he added a third result: gratitude. Numerous times in his epistles Paul challenged believers to be known for giving thanks ... to God (see also Col. 3:15,17; 1 Thess. 5:18). The Ephesian believers knew that Paul had experienced much that might give most Christians an excuse to grumble and complain. They also knew that Paul refused to take that route. To Paul, a grumbling spirit and the Holy Spirit did not belong together.

Paul developed an amazing doctrine of thanksgiving with just a few words. When should believers be grateful? Always, at all times. We can cultivate an attitude of gratitude in two ways. First, we can develop the practice of grateful prayer at various times each day—for example, upon awaking, at meals, and at bedtime (see Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10). Second, we can seek to project an attitude of thanksgiving daily, even when irritating things happen.

For what should believers be grateful? For everything. Paul wrote this very instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: “Give thanks in everything.” There is no circumstance in life that God cannot use for good in His people’s lives (Rom. 8:28). Of course, Paul’s encouragement about being grateful for everything should not be applied inappropriately. That is, we are not expected to be thankful for disease epidemics, natural disasters, mass shootings, and the like. God can certainly bring (and has brought) good out of such catastrophes, and for that we should rightfully be grateful. But we are not expected to be grateful for evil and death.

To whom should we be grateful? To the Father. Paul had previously referred to God as believers’ loving Father several times in the letter (1:2,3,17; 2:18; 3:14; 4:6). Our prayers as believers are directed to Him, and our gratitude to Him in all of life’s circumstances shows that we trust Him. His actions are always good, even when evil and suffering are present.

How should we be grateful? We should express our gratitude in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This means more than just repeating those exact words as closing to our prayers. It means that we acknowledge Christ as our Lord and look to Him in confidence as our Savior. Notice that Paul used the plural pronoun our in referring to the community of believers. Only those who are Christ’s followers can genuinely pray in such a way. Jesus invited His followers to pray confidently in His name (John 14:13-14).

Notice also that even our prayers of thanksgiving are to reflect the Triune Godhead. That is, those who are filled with the Holy Spirit always give thanks to the Father in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ.
**VERSE 21**

submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.

The fourth result of Christians’ being filled with the Spirit is demonstrated in their mutual submission within the body of believers. Grammatically, the Greek verb rendered *submitting* is parallel to the previous verbs translated “speaking,” “singing,” “making music,” and “giving thanks.” Together the verbs represent the kinds of actions to be expected from believers who are living by the Spirit.

At the same time, many Bible students also recognize that 5:21 is a bridge verse leading into Paul’s teachings about Christian family members (see Session 12). Submission is a relationship principle that is reflected both in the Christian community at large and more specifically in the way Christian wives are to relate to their own husbands in their marriages.

The Spirit-filled life is expressed not in isolation but in sharing life with one another in the body of Christ, the church. The verb rendered *submitting* can also mean “be subject to” or “be under the authority of.” Paul used the verb in a variety of contexts: submission to government (Rom. 13:1); the final submission of the Son to the Father (1 Cor. 15:28); and slaves’ submission to their masters (Titus 2:9). In the church and the home, submission is to be voluntary and joyful as a way of pleasing the Lord.

The phrase in the fear of Christ appears only here in the New Testament. It is related to the Old Testament teaching about “the fear of the Lord” (see Deut. 10:12,20-21; Prov. 1:7). Here Paul applied this Old Testament truth to reverence and respect for the Lord Jesus, an indirect statement about the Son’s deity. When we as believers are reverently subject to Christ, we find that submitting to others in the body of Christ is not difficult.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Use the spaces below to reflect on the results of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Express Paul’s meaning in your words, then consider ways the results are evident in your life.

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