

Sermon 26: Ephesians 5:15-17: Walking Wisely

OUTLINE

Walking wisely
Redeeming time
Discerning God's will

INTRODUCTION

The word walk is used several times in the letter to the Ephesians. The word is used metaphorically to indicate a lifestyle, a life direction, a pattern of behaviour. It is used to describe our lives before Christ, 2:2, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.' 4:17, 'Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.' And in contrast to that we are called to walk in light of God's work of the gospel in us, 2:10, 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' 4:1, 'I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.' 5:2, 'And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' 5:8, 'for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.' And again in the verses we are considering today, 15-17, '15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.' Walk in good works, walk in a manner worthy of your calling, in other words a walk of unity, walk in love, walk in the light, and now walk wisely.

Paul has been telling us what to do and why to do it. He has just told us to walk in the light because of our identity as children of light, now he tells us to walk wisely, why? Because the days are evil. The structure of these verses are simple Paul tells us to walk wisely, and tells us two ways to do so, by redeeming the time, and by discerning the Lord's will. We will look at these verses under three headings, seeking wisdom, redeeming time and discerning God's will.

Walking wisely

V15, 'Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.' In order to be the lights of the world, in order to live as light, and speak as light, and shine the light on others that their darkness is exposed and they are converted, in order to do that effectively we need to learn how to walk wisely. Being an effective light can only come if we have a wise walk, a walk typified by God's wisdom. In the OT Israel was to display the wisdom of God by walking in God's law, Paul is drawing on this idea here. Now walking for us is not a chore, it is automatic, we walk by muscle memory not by a constant and deliberate act. But anyone who has broken a hip or back and has to relearn how to walk and they have to give thought to every step, they need to watch their feet as they put them down, they need to consider their environment more closely, it is this type of walking that Paul calls for when he says, 'look carefully then how you walk.' This is the walk of someone in a minefield not having a stroll. We walk with our eyes open alert to traps, hazards, enemies, ambushes, quick sand and anything else that will hinder us. Some translations use the word circumspectly. 'Our English word circumspect is from the Latin circumspicere "to look around" and in turn is from circum- = around + specere (think "spectacles" - eye glasses) = to look which together

convey the literal picture of looking around and figuratively the idea of being cautious. One who is walking circumspectly is one who is surveying all circumstances and possible consequences BEFORE (NOT AFTER!) acting or deciding. It reminds me of an old saying "Look before you leap!" (which means carefully consider the possible consequences before you take action!) In fact probably most of the time (given our fallen nature), it would be wise to LOOK and DO NOT LEAP! A great word picture!¹

We are called to be wise and not unwise, wise and not foolish, what is the Bible thinking behind these concepts? Wisdom was something very popular at the time of Paul, the Greeks are credited as loving wisdom, the word philosophy means lover of wisdom. Yet the bible also criticizes the wisdom of the world. What wisdom is it that Paul is telling us to pursue? Wisdom according to the Hebrew mind is the art of living under God. Biblical wisdom is not firstly theoretical like Greek philosophy but more practical. The Stoics were concerned for practical living, biblical wisdom is more like the Stoics. However, biblical wisdom is not for the intellectual, you don't have to have a high IQ to be wise. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. This helps us to understand the biblical view of folly. Ps. 14:1 tells that the fool says in his heart that there is no God. Atheism is the essence of being a fool, folly, the practical outworking is living as though God is not real, practical atheism. By this definition folly is not only those things that are dumb by virtue of their being wasteful or harmful; but things that are very sophisticated can be called foolishness because they are done out of a disregard of God. In other words there are many things that have an appearance of wisdom but are actually foolishness because they do not consider God. For example, many think it wise to have marriage contracts that are up for review every 15 years because so many people get divorced, but God says marriage is for life. Some think that it is a good idea to not have kids because the world is overpopulated but God says go forth and multiply, and that children are a blessing, make disciples of them and the more you have the more you may be able to convert for a new creation.

A major difference between wisdom and folly is that wisdom fears God, but folly is wise in its own eyes, Prov. 12:15, 'The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.' Wisdom acknowledges God as Lord and obeys His will, wisdom recognizes that God knows best and accepts His ways as good, but folly thinks it knows best. This is the war fighting for the minds of Christians today. Whose view of sex is best God's or the world's? Whose view of how the family should be structured and run is best, God's or the world's?

There is a lot being offered in the area of self-improvement today, and it advertises well. A lot of ungodly living is not aiming at self-destructive addictions, but rather they are encouraging anthropocentric ways of life that best suit you, that make space for you, that help you realize your true self, who help you realize and express your unique self. What does wisdom look like in an age where the godless path seems like a good and wise path? What helps me is to realize that two things thought to be mutually exclusive are intrinsically related. Too often the choice is presented as being between happiness and holiness. Our greatest good lies in pursuing God's glory not our good to the exclusion of God's glory. This is why wisdom is the fear of the Lord, choose the path of obedience to God and because He has made you to walk in it, you will be happiest when seeking His glory, when doing what you are made for. And because you are made in God's image that is seeking your authentic self. The world is selling finding your true self as the most constructive path to happiness, the Bible tells us that wisdom is in the fear of the Lord.

1 https://www.preceptaustin.org/ephesians_515-16

The path of wisdom is the path of taking sin and its consequences seriously, the path of folly is to scoff at sin. Prov. 14:9, 'Fools mock at the guilt offering, but the upright enjoy acceptance.' How many today mock Christians because they seek forgiveness, how many have hardened their hearts and pursued sin despite its consequences? We listen to what God says about sin, that it is a liar, it cannot deliver on its promises; that sin is a destroyer, our selfishness destroys our lives, our neighbor's lives and our families as well; that sin is an enslaver and a hard taskmaster. Wisdom heeds God's warnings, and believes that there is a devil in the world waging war against us, taking measures against him. It accepts the analysis of the human heart as harboring an enemy against God who would love nothing more than to cast off God's rule.

We are called to walk in wisdom, that is as if God and all that He says is true, not folly which is practical atheism.

Redeeming time

V16, 'making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.' We are all familiar with famous words, 'redeem the time' the older translation of these words. The word is literally redeem, it means to buy back at a price. Paul is stressing the urgency of the matter given the importance of time. We cannot stop time, steal time, stretch time, reverse time, borrow time, we can only use it or lose, waste it or make the best use of it. We have many good Christian examples who have modelled this for us. Think of the young Jonathan Edwards who started to write his famous resolutions before he was 20, here are a few of them: '5. Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.

6. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.

7. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.

17. Resolved, that I will live so, as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.

18. Resolved, to live so, at all times, as I think is best in my devout frames, and when I have clearest notions of things of the gospel, and another world.

19. Resolved, never to do any thing, which I should be afraid to do, if I expected it would not be above an hour, before I should hear the last trump.

28. Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

41. Resolved, to ask myself, at the end of every day, week, month and year, wherein I could possibly, in any respect, have done better. Jan. 11, 1723.

52. I frequently hear persons in old age, say how they would live, if they were to live their lives over again: Resolved, that I will live just so as I can think I shall wish I had done, supposing I live to old age. July 8, 1723.

56. Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken, my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.'

Another outstanding example of a productive Christian is Charles Spurgeon. He has written more than any other person in the English language. In his autobiography he wrote: 'I have to look after the Orphanage, have charge of a church with four thousand members, sometimes there are marriages and burials to be undertaken, there is the weekly sermon to be revised, The Sword and the Trowel to be edited, and besides all that, a weekly average of five hundred letters to be answered. This, however, is only half my duty, for there are innumerable churches established by friends, with the affairs of which I am closely connected, to say nothing of the cases of difficulty which are constantly being referred to me.'" (*Autobiography*, vol. 2,192)' At the age of 50 he was part of 66 organizations. He

read 6 books a week. He wrote 140 books, some of which he worked on for 20 years. And he would often work 18 hours a day.

Why should we be so productive? 'Because the days are evil', and what is the significance of that? Let Paul himself answer you in Romans 13:11-14, 'Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹²The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.' Christ can come at any moment and the opportunity to save souls, and to glorify God on this battlefield will be over. With so many temptations, so many distractions, so many good things that can absorb us and take us away from our duties, we have to be deliberate in using our time well.

Discerning God's will

V17, 'Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.' We have already discussed what foolishness is, living as though God is not real, now we want to understand what Paul means about understanding God's will. The will of the Lord would of course be the path of wisdom and not of folly. And in many ways the practical part of the letter to the Ephesians is Paul specifying what God's will for living in dark times is. We are to walk in unity in the church; we are to benefit from the ministry of the local church and translate that into serving the body with our gifts. We are to put away the various sinful ways of living associated with our former lives, like lying and laziness and anger and the general malice we had towards others. We are to be forgiving and kind and imitate God's love. We are to walk in personal purity free from sexual immorality, greed and have a pure way of speaking. We are to walk as children of light and walk wisely. Paul continues to spell this out in the rest of the book. This means being filled with the Spirit, going to church, having strong biblical marriages after the pattern of creation. We should have godly families and a Christian work ethic in the work place. We must stand strong in light of the spiritual struggle we are in and put on the armour of God. There is much about this struggle that is defensive in nature but there is the offensive use of the Sword of the Spirit as well as prayer that we are to be committed to.

Now there is a lot of talk about knowing God's will for your life. By this statement it is usually not referring to the general statements of God's will like His will for us to be holy, e.g. 1 Thess. 4:3-5, 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.' No many mean the person I am to marry, the job I am to get and the place I am to live. This has led to a lot of analysis paralysis and angst over getting it right and worry about missing God, or getting ahead of God, or out of step with God. We solve this problem by understanding the Bible's distinction between God's decretive will and God's revealed will.

Firstly, the Bible talks about God's decretive will, that is His big plan that incorporates everything into it. The will of God as it is used in verses like Ephesians 1:11, 'In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.' God like any good architect or builder does not randomly start creating and see where it heads, it was all planned out in eternity past and God is using His power to make His plan A happen. This will includes the details of every single one of our lives and includes everything that ever happens. This will is hidden

to us and never fully disclosed apart from some big headlines like the Second Coming. This will cannot be overthrown or disobeyed.

Secondly, there is God's revealed will, in other words His commands. God has revealed in many places His will for how we are to live our lives, e.g. the Ten Commandments. This will is not hidden but is revealed and it can be disobeyed. These are the only types of will that the Bible talks about but we talk about a third kind, an individual personal will that can be discerned by inner voices, visions, prophecies, and other crystal ball future revealing means. It is our obsession with the third type of will that has led to endless trouble in Christianity.

We are to live trusting in will 1 that God has a perfect plan and everything that happens in it is for the good of those who love Him and His glory. Trust implies that we do not need to know the future but who holds the future and can put our confidence in Him without having to have any other information. We are to live obeying will 2, the express commands of God. Holiness is His will for our lives and the Spirit has been given to enable us to be holy. We are not to do nothing while we try and find out our own individual futures. Our obsession with our own futures is a type of superstition. We may not consult gypsies, tarot cards, tea leaves and horoscopes but we have the same desire to be able to control our own destinies. God has not called you to know the future, if He wanted you to know the future He would have given you that ability. Instead He wants you to let Him be God and be faithful and trusting in a holy life as He works out His purposes.

Thankfully we have the Bible to help us know God's will, and we have the promise in James 1:5 that if we seek wisdom God will grant it to us if we ask in prayer. This plumbline of scripture and the Spirit's aid will enable us to know what God's will is. So when we are faced with something in our culture, like whether we should attend a gay wedding or use preferred gender pronouns, the Bible instructs us to know what to do.

In conclusion then, let us walk wisely by redeeming the time and walking according to God's will.