

## Living Worship, Living Wisdom

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 17, 2003.

Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-20

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

How many times have you heard someone say, “Be careful”? Be careful driving. Be careful about the people you hang out with. Be careful how you use your credit card. In the opening verse of our Epistle lesson, Paul writes, “Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.” In other words, be as careful to develop spiritually as physically, emotionally, and socially. Paul lists three ways to live wisely and carefully.

*First, Paul says that wise Christians who live carefully make “the most of the time.”*<sup>1</sup> In Greek there are at least two words for “time”. *One word, Χρονος, means chronological time.* Chronological time gives a running account of *trivial* events like, “I got up at 6, ate breakfast, listened to the news and left for work.” In the great scheme of things that’s relatively inconsequential. That’s chronological time, clock time, ticking away endlessly. *But there’s another kind of time Καριος. Καριος is critical time, the kind of time Thomas Paine* <sup>Solomon, Jesus</sup> was talking about when he wrote in 1776, “These are the times that try men’s soul.” In the critical years before the Civil War, James Russell Lowell wrote,

*Once to every man and nation  
Comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth with falsehood,  
For the good or evil side.*<sup>2</sup>

In other words, there are critical times in our lives and in the life of a nation, critical times in which we are faced as individuals and as a nation with a choice between truth and falsehood, good and evil, and, Paul says, Christians must be careful to make wise decisions when the critical time arrives. *Give examples from everyday life.* We live carefully and wisely when we make wise decisions at critical times.

*Secondly, Paul calls upon Christians to understand the will of the Lord.*<sup>3</sup> The will of the Lord isn’t always easy to understand. In fact I’m a little leery about people who claim to know the will of the Lord – *for the life of somebody else* like the man who said to a woman, “The Lord told me he wants you to marry me.” Understanding the will of the Lord isn’t always easy, as the history of the church has taught us. Think of how the early church struggled to understand the will of the Lord. For example, despite what the Old Testament said, Jesus declared that all food was clean. With some justification his enemies said, “The will of God is

plainly revealed in Scripture and the Law of God distinguishes between clean and unclean food.” Then Paul came along and said that the will of the Lord no longer required circumcision for any of God’s people. His enemies argued, “The will of God revealed in the Old Testament plainly says circumcision is required.” Eventually the church understood the will of the Lord to have abrogated the Old Testament laws regarding clean and unclean food and the rite of circumcision – but only after a long, divisive controversy. As the early church struggled to understand the will of the Lord they came to believe that God was doing a new thing in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>4</sup> To this day, it is imperative that the church understands the will of the Lord - through prayer, the study of Scripture, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit – so that we will make wise, not foolish, decisions for the critical times in which we live.

*Thirdly, Paul says, “Do not be drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit.”*<sup>5</sup> Leighton Ford, a Billy Graham associate evangelist, once told a story about Billy Graham. The senior pastor of a huge southern mega-church was giving Dr. Graham a tour of the building. As they walked, the minister talked with pride about how his church strictly disciplined church members who don’t obey biblical commands. For example, there was a church member who was a drunkard and the church disciplined him because the Bible says, “Do not be drunk with wine.” The church excluded the man from communion until he showed evidence of repentance. Furthermore, they required him to confess his sin before the congregation. The pastor was rather proud that his church exercised church discipline. After hearing the story, Dr. Graham said, “The Bible says, ‘do not be drunk with wine, *but be filled with the Spirit.*’ If you discipline someone who gets drunk, do you also discipline people who aren’t filled with the Spirit?” The pastor became suddenly silent. Dr. Graham’s wise answer points out that the Bible has many commands. Why is it that we tend to focus on a few of God’s commands – usually ones that we have no trouble with – while ignoring others like, “Sell your possessions, and give alms.”<sup>6</sup>

So if we are to be careful Christians and live as wise rather than foolish people, we will make the most of the critical moments in our life, seek to understand the will of the Lord, and be filled with the Spirit. But how are we filled with the Spirit? Paul seems to indicate that the filling of the Spirit is not an individual ecstatic experience but, rather, an event closely related to Christian worship.

Paul writes, "be filled with the Spirit, *as you sing* psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts." Scholars have tried to distinguish the meaning between psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs but they haven't been able to agree. I believe that when Paul used these three terms for music he simply meant that as we sing a variety of music in praise to God we'll be filled with the Spirit. We'll sing the great old hymns of the past accompanied by the organ, but we'll also sing rousing new songs and choruses accompanied by tambourines, guitars and electronic synthesizers; we'll sing classical arias and we will also rap out the Gospel in worship. As we experience diversity in music and singing and worship we'll be filled with the Spirit. If we reject diversity in music and worship expression we very likely could be quenching the Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

*Second, God's people are filled with the Spirit as we give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.*"<sup>8</sup> In other words, as we become truly thankful in worship we'll be filled with the Spirit. The chief act of Christian worship, Holy Communion, is called the Eucharist which means thanksgiving; thanksgiving for the eternal life Jesus Christ gives us through his body and blood.

When we were children our parents taught us to say, "Thank you" even when we weren't grateful. "Say, 'thank you' to Uncle Henry for giving you the silver dollar."<sup>9</sup> Our parents taught us to express thanks before eating, "Thank you for the food we eat. Thank you for the world so sweet. Thank you for the birds that sing. Thank you God for everything." At night we knelt at our bed with our parents and prayed, "Thank you, God, for mommy and daddy, and for the nice day and for everyone. Amen." When your neighbors took you to the circus when you returned your mom would say, "Did you remember to say, 'Thank you'?" Your parents even made you send *thank you* notes for gifts you received. You may have discovered that as it became your habit to say, "Thank you" you eventually became truly thankful.

*Give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*, Paul says. Edward King, an Anglican priest, spoke about giving thanks always in the name of Christ in one of his sermons. He said, "I will thank (God) for the pleasures given me through my senses, for the glory of the thunder, for the mystery of music, the singing of birds and the laughter of children. I will thank him for the pleasures of seeing, for the delights through colour, for the awe of the sunset, the beauty of flowers, the smile of

friendship and the look of love; for the changing beauty of the clouds, for the wild roses in the hedges, for the form and beauty of birds, for the leaves on the trees in spring and autumn, for the witness of the leafless trees through the winter, teaching us that death is sleep and not destruction...”<sup>10</sup>

As we develop the discipline of giving thanks to God in all things when we reach the end of our lives, we will approach death far differently than we would have otherwise. When “the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done”<sup>11</sup> we will look back over our lives and say, “Thank you, God.”

*We thank you, O God, that through Word and Sacrament you have given us your Son who is the true bread from heaven and food of eternal life. So strengthen us in your service that our daily living may show our thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 5:16.

<sup>2</sup> James Russell Lowell, *The (Presbyterian) Hymnal* (1933)

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 5:17.

<sup>4</sup> The church struggled over the issue of church membership in the 1700s. New School Presbyterians said, “It’s the will of the Lord for every member to give a personal testimony of the work of salvation in their heart.” Old School Presbyterians said, “No body can really know the heart of a person. We need require only a life free of scandal and a credible confession of faith.” Later, Presbyterians struggled over understanding the will of the Lord regarding slavery. Some said, “The Bible plainly allows for the institution of slavery. Old Testament laws regulated slavery and some New Testament Christians like Philemon actually owned slaves.” But other’s said that in the coming of Jesus Christ God did a new thing and in the light of Christ we have come to understand the will of the Lord to reject slavery. More recently Presbyterians have struggled to understand the will of the Lord with regard to women’s ordination. Some said, “The Bible says that a woman should not teach or have authority over a man.” Others said, “Yes, but the Bible also says that a new day has come and God has poured out his Spirit on men and women to preach.” And so today the church struggles to understand the will of the Lord. When we some struggling over understanding the will of the Lord there’s a good chance that we will have ceased to be a church.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 5:18.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 12:33.

<sup>7</sup> 1Thessalonians 5:19.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 5:20

<sup>9</sup> William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 31, No 3, July, August, September 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Edward King, as quoted in *The Westminster Collection of Christian Meditations* compiled by Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild.

<sup>11</sup> Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, the committal service.

<sup>12</sup> The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship.