

“Living Life Strategically”



January 8, 2005

Ephesians 5:15-17

[Move to platform with **MP3** ear plugs on. Complain about the fact that “ever since Christmas, all my wife ever does is scream at me! And that is not even the worse part. She constantly complains that *all I ever do* is *either* ignore her or *yell* at her! She says I need to see a counselor. I just don’t *get it!*” (**Taking off the plugs**) So what are you laughing at? You think it’s *funny* that my wife and I are having problems? Or maybe you’re laughing because you *can’t believe* a person could really be so dumb!]

How could a guy walking around with headphones on 24 hours a day *not* expect that to cause some serious communication problems?! I don’t need a counselor as much as I need a mirror. Sound ridiculous? Maybe. But it’s really not as far-fetched as it seems. You see, we have a couple of problems that we need to be reminded of from time to time.”

Problem 1: You are a creature of habit. You get used to things being a certain way and before long you are functioning on auto-pilot. (Like learning to drive a car). Now that is not all bad. In fact, God made you that way. If he didn’t, you would be in big trouble (Explain). So this capacity to repeat actions without having to think them through in great detail makes life work much more efficiently. But it also has a downside. Like when you are driving down the interstate and suddenly wondering how you got where you are! *That is downright scary!* But what is even worse is that because of your bias toward sin, you are far more prone to acquire sinful habits than godly ones. Which brings us to the second problem...

Problem 2: Your heart is in a continuous operational mode—even when you are not thinking about what is going on in your heart. In fact, you can’t even understand your heart apart from the truth that your Creator reveals to you about it in His Word. One of the key truths that God reveals about your heart is what it is constantly doing. Look at Hebrews 4:12: “*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*”

This verse is located in a passage that addresses our accountability to listen to and obey the Word of God. In verse 11, it warns those who disobey God’s Word. In verse 12, it explains why it is dangerous to disobey God’s Word. Because the Word that we disobey will one day become the Word that stands in judgment over us.

But notice how that Word will judge us. It judges us not merely based on our sinful actions—but (listen carefully) “*our innermost thoughts and desires.*” Did you catch what the Holy Spirit just said? That is an incredibly insightful phrase: “*our innermost thoughts and desires.*” You see, we are not *merely* creatures of habit. We are *more* than Pavlov’s dogs. We are human beings created in the image of God who were made to *think* and *desire*—to *reason* and *want*—to *interpret* and *worship*. And we were made to receive interpretation of life *from God* so we would *worship Him alone* and serve Him. But sin changed all of that. That is why we need a Savior. One who not only takes away the penalty of our sin—but who also completely renovates the sinful thinking and wanting *behind* our sinful words and acts.

So let’s back up for a moment and put those two concepts together. We do things *habitually*. We are driven by our *thoughts* and *desires*. Think with me now. What happens when you mix those two things together? We are *habitual*—and we are *driven*. As we will see in Ephesians 5:18, if we are filled by God’s Spirit, our *habituality* and *driven-ness* can be powerful forces for good. But if we are not filled by God’s Spirit, they can lead to a wasteful lifestyle—or worse yet a destructive lifestyle (See Ephesians 5:18 where Paul talks about one example of a wasted, destructive lifestyle—namely, drunkenness).

The famous missionary and author, Amy Carmichael, used to say: “*Be careful what you set your heart upon, for it surely shall be yours.*” Because we are driven and because we are creatures of habit, we can all too easily plow ourselves into ruts that begin to define our lives. And what makes it worse is that we live in a world that is more than willing to help us dig those ruts (John talks about that in I John 2:15-16 where he warns us not to fall in love with the world and its tendency to promote the worship of our desires—specifically the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life).

A personal example: Starbucks coffee. My car turns into them almost daily—automatically! (You can get addicted to that stuff—or anything for that matter!)

You get the picture? It’s one thing to *enjoy* coffee. It’s another thing to *live* for it. It’s one thing to enjoy food—it’s another thing to live for it. Or to try and live *away from* it so you can have the perfect body! It’s one thing to enjoy all the things that God gives you in terms of your home and possessions—it’s another thing to live for them and the endless acquiring of yet more. It is one thing to appreciate children as a gift of God and to seek to raise them to know and love Him—it’s another thing to stake your identity in their academic or athletic success—or to live chiefly for their approval. “*Be careful what you set your heart upon, for it surely shall be yours.*”

The more you give yourself to something—*anything*—the more it becomes *habit-forming*. The *more* it becomes habit-forming, the more it *owns* you. That is good when it comes to God. That is bad when it comes to your job, your house, your financial portfolio, your kids, the approval of others, food, drink, MP3 players, video games, sports, exercise, vacations, retirement—and a host of other potential idols.

The Apostle Paul realized this and wrote about it in Ephesians 5:15-17. As you turn there, let me remind you of the context of this passage. Beginning with Ephesians 4:1, Paul has shifted his emphasis from explaining all that God has done for His people in planning and pursuing their salvation (ch. 1-3) to how we should respond to this incredible plan. To summarize, chapters 1-3 show us that we God has made believers into *new* people with a *new* purpose. Because of Jesus Christ, we are not what we used to be—sinners enslaved to our sin. But we do not fully enjoy all that we will be—completely redeemed people able to enjoy uninterrupted fellowship with God and with a complete resemblance to the *perfect* human, the God-man Jesus Christ. Chapters 4-6 call upon us to get with God’s plan.

So far in chapters 4-5, Paul been contrasting this new life you have in Christ with the old life of those who don’t know Christ. According to Eph. 4:17-24, this new life involves a completely different way of thinking—thinking dominated by *God’s Word* rather than your own selfish impulses. In 5:2, it involves a life of love vs. living for yourself. In 5:8, it means behaving as children of light as opposed to the values of a sin-darkened culture. And now in verses 15-17, he is reinforcing what he has already said—this time using the wisdom language of Proverbs. Let’s read these verses together:

*15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as **unwise** but as **wise**, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be **foolish**, but **understand** what the Lord’s will is. [Pray]*

Life is too short and eternity is too important for us to mindlessly be plowing ruts that ultimately are going nowhere. In this brief portion, Paul gives you a powerful *back hoe* to move you out of meaningless *habitual* ruts and into a lifestyle that *strategically* moves you toward God’s goal of making you like His Son. The first truth is...

I. Take a careful look at *how* you are living (15).

Benge translation: “Slow down and *think* about what you are actually doing.” Remember, we are *driven*—and we are *habitual*. And because we tend to live on auto-pilot, we get more concerned about the temperature in the cockpit than the destination to which we are currently in route.

So I have a few *global positioning questions* to ask you to make sure you are heading the same direction that God’s Holy Spirit has in mind. Ready? Warning: These questions are helpful—but may cause a bit of discomfort. Maybe even a little spiritual queasiness in the stomach. Don’t let that keep you from looking at yourself the way this text is instructing you:

1. How do you respond on a Sunday morning when you are running a little behind as you head to the bathroom to take a shower—and you find it is *already* occupied? Do you *rejoice* that someone else is able to get ready in a timely way? Or do you turn into an impersonation of SWAT team doing a raid on the house of a suspected terrorist? “*We know you are in there. Open up and come out with both hands up—Now!*”

2. Husbands—What do you do when your wife told you that morning that she was going to cook your favorite meal—and you have visions of a nice, laid back evening? That night as you are driving home, you are smelling and tasting the Chicken Cordon Bleu and homemade bread. But when you get home, you don't smell the bread. There isn't even a chicken in the oven. Just a half-open can of chicken soup (still cold) and a frazzled wife who looks at you through tear-stained eyes like you were an Army Ranger who has come to save Private Ryan. How do you *respond*? What do you *do* with those *expectations*?

3. Mothers, how do you respond when your child fails to obey you the first time around? Do you raise your voice? Count to 10? Tell your child: "Just wait til your father gets home?" Just get exasperated and scream? Or if he is a teenager—just try to remind him of all the things you do—and what do you get in return? Not even a *little* respect?

4. How do you respond when you have a boss who is always waiting until the last minute to give you a project—and then he gets all over your case because you didn't have the project done yesterday? Do you: **A.** Have a doll in your third drawer that has an amazing resemblance to your boss—and is full of pins and needles? **B.** Take out your frustrations on other drivers on the way home—or on the dog when you get home? **C.** Announce to your family you have had a bad day—and they all better *steer clear*?

Did you see any resemblance between yourself and any of those scenarios? If you did—don't be discouraged. Just *do* what Paul is saying! Stop—and take a look at yourself. Evaluate yourself and what you are doing. And as you do that, keep in mind the second thing that Paul says....

II. Make sure you are living *wisely* (15b-16)

As you stop and look at your typical actions and reactions, as you consider the thoughts and intents of your heart that guided you to respond the way you did—ask: Am I responding *foolishly* or *wisely*?

This is such an important question to ask because we typically act before we have even fully processed what has happened? Remember, we are creatures of habit and we are driven by our thoughts and desires (**VCR illustration**). If we don't take the time to slow down and *freeze frame our thinking* and *analyze our desires*—we will continue to respond in ways that not only hinder God's goals—but cause us even more grief and humiliation.

Here is the problem. We don't need a lot of coaching to be good at folly! In fact, Proverbs 22:15 says that we are *born* that way. And unless we know Christ who is wisdom—and are daily submitting to His Spirit who is leading us into more and more wisdom, we will by sheer default end up doing the foolish thing—particularly when things aren't going the way we want them to.

You might ask yourself—what exactly is folly? Folly doesn't mean you don't know anything. Or that you got D's and F's in grade school. You could be have a Ph. D and be a fool! In fact, you can go to church all your life and be able to recite all kinds of Bible verses and be a fool. The foolish in Christ's parable in Matthew 7 knew all about Christ's teaching. He simply *never applied* it! Folly isn't as much about what you know (though that is important)—but what you *do* with what you know. That means you can be attending church at Cornerstone for years—10 years, 20 years—even 30 or 40. And still be living life foolishly.

Why would a person do that? Now that is a question that really brings us to the heart of folly. Listen to what Solomon said in Proverbs 1:7:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

Folly is an unwillingness to submit to God. It betrays a heart that believes Satan's lie in Genesis 3 that my way is smarter and better than *God's* way.

You may think that yelling at your kids is working because you get them to be quiet. But in the end, you will find that you have not prepared them to live in the fear of the Lord and submit to a God who is just and holy—but is also delightful in His mercy and love. They will not only grow up not to think well of you—but they will think even less well of God!

There is an “*afterwards*” to everything we do. And so Paul says: **Stop!** Think about what you are doing and where that train is going to take you!

Transition: So *how* do you do that? How do you become a person that learns to deliberately pursue wisdom rather than merely defaulting to your natural mode of folly? Paul answers that question in verse 16.

-By *making the most* of every opportunity God gives you.

The text here contains a fascinating word picture that is picked up in more literal translations like the KJV: “***Redeeming the time*** because the days are evil.” This phrase pictures, as Bob described back in December, a prisoner or slave being bought out of an ancient slave market. Just as Christ laid down his life to buy us out of the slave market of sin, just as He paid the price to redeem us with His blood, we are to “buy up the time.” But the word for time (KJV) is not “clock” time. It has more to do with *seasons or opportunities*.

And so the NIV rightly translates this phrase: “***Making the most of every opportunity.***” That sounds pretty good to us. Until we look at the next phrase: “Because the days are evil.” And at first that seems to make no sense. Maybe Paul meant—“***although*** the days are evil.” But if you go back to the original language, the word is the most common word for “because” in the New Testament! So what is going on here?

Paul isn't simply saying: "Well, you just have to play the hand you were dealt." He isn't saying like some say: "Try to turn the lemons into lemonade." It's more like the story I heard of two scalp hunters named Will and Henry back in the 19th century. They were looking for Native American scalps which were going for the unheard of price of \$25 per scalp. One night they stopped and pitched a tent in the open plains—just in front of a big ridge. The next morning Will woke up and saw a feather pop up at the top of this long ridge. Then he saw another and another. By the time he finished counting, he realized that he and his friend were surrounded by 10,000 Indians. And so he turned and started shaking his companion: **"Will, Will, wake up. We're rich!"**

Paul says: Evil times must not be taken at face value. Though they may be seem to be wrapped in great difficulty—they are of great value. What exactly are "evil days?" This is not the first time Paul has used such a term. In Gal. 1:4 he talks about the "present evil age." In Eph. 2:7, he talks about the "coming ages" or His eternal kingdom. Paul's point is that you and I have an opportunity to do something we will never have the opportunity to do in ages to come: to display before a watching world God's power, wisdom, and grace in the midst of a sin-cursed world!

Instead of bemoaning the evil and heading for the rooftops of our houses to wait for the rapture, God calls you and me to buy up the opportunities of a close out sale that will only exist for a little while longer.

You say: "That sounds good—but I just don't think like that." Neither do I! That is why we need to be forming the kind of relationships with each other that help us to learn to slow down the fast-moving situations of life so we can discern patterns of thinking and wanting that are keeping us from seizing the opportunity to grow in thinking and acting like Christ. Just think about it. Christ didn't exactly come to Eden. And of all places to be tempted—a wilderness mind you! He knows something about temptation—and mercy. And He stands ready as a faithful high priest to provide us mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

And He can begin to help you buy back moments that in the past were a source of embarrassment and disappointment—and he can begin to work through you to turn those moments into opportunities to run to Christ and to rely on His strength and develop in you a wisdom and patience and mercy and love that can help to be content with chicken soup and a night of parental rescue when you were expecting to relax. He can help you to rescue a manipulative child rather than allowing their follow to become an excuse for yours! He can give you the grace to serve a thoughtless boss with patience and even compassion because He lived in the same world and He has walked in your shoes.

Transition: But how exactly do you learn to do this? To do this, you need to...

III. Understand what God wants you to do (vs. 17).

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”

What does God mean by the term, “God’s will.” That is one of these phrases we love to pounce on and use to help us figure out things like spouses and careers. And while that is a legitimate aspect of God’s will—it is not the one that is the primary focus of Scripture.

Others have tried to point out that God’s will frequently encompasses His moral will—and that is a frequent emphasis in Scripture (I Thess. 4:3; 5:18) You could even argue this in light of what Paul is going to be talking about in the coming verses starting with verse 18 and going through chapter 6:9.

But in the context of this book, I think the will of God is even bigger than that. I think Paul is talking about God’s will in terms of what He is doing through the Gospel to fulfill His promise to Eve and later to Abraham that He is going to bless the whole earth and one day restore it to absolute perfection for His glory. And it all comes about through the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Not only what He did when He came to earth. But what He is doing now to finish His redeeming work through His Church—the body of Christ!

So know God’s will. Learn what God wants you to do with “desperate spouses”, manipulative children, and insensitive bosses. But as you do, don’t just focus on the instructions. See them in light of the bigger picture. See what God is up to. Saturate your mind with the Gospel of Mark and follow in the footsteps of your mighty Servant-Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Savor Him. Savor His beauty. Crave His beauty. Long for His glory to be revealed in your life—and then you will have yes to begin to seize the moments all around you.

Moments not just in your family or at your workplace—but in this community. Moments to be pursued not only individually where you live or work—but corporately in and through this body at Cornerstone!

For the next two weeks we will be focusing on: “Making the most of your opportunities in *uncertain* times.” With the changes going on in our world, these are uncertain times, particularly in manufacturing communities like Detroit. We are not prophets of doom. Nor should we be. We have no idea what is ahead. But if you read the headlines of the News, the Free Press, or the Macomb Daily—you get the sense there is fear and anxiety about the future.

In light of our text tonight, what would Paul say? How would he see it? What would he tell us to do? He would look at the situation through kingdom lenses and would say: ***Better not waste your opportunity***. So come back and find out what you can do to take advantage of kingdom opportunities in the midst of changing times. We will be doing different things—and using some other men from our elder board to help you think through what you need to do personally and how you can be better to serve others. I hope you will be here—and invite some others.

