

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Festival of Favorite Hymns
October 29, 2006
Ephesians 5:15-20

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Seize the Day

1. Wary of time-wasters
2. Watchful for opportunities

^{NIV} Ephesians 5:15 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.¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Christian Friends,

The Roman poet Horace was apparently the first to say, "Seize the day." Actually, he wrote it in Latin, "*Carpe diem*." In the context he was making the point that the future is uncertain and life is short, therefore, it's advisable to make full use of each day you get.

St. Paul wrote something similar in his letter to the Ephesians. In our second lesson today he urges us to "*(make) the most of every opportunity*," literally, to "redeem the time." His motive for saying this is a bit different from Horace's, however. He is not simply advising that we try to pack as much activity into whatever days we have left in our lives. Rather, he sees each day is a gift from God, a precious gift of time to be used to God's glory and for the good of other people. So what we have before us this morning is a Christian version of "seize the day." And, as the apostle explains, seizing the day means (1) being wary of time-wasters, and (2) being watchful for opportunities.

1. Wary of time-wasters

Paul begins, "*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.*" "Be very careful, then..." The "then" indicates that the basis for this encouragement is something Paul has written previously. That would be the reminder of the glorious transformation God's grace has produced in us: "**For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.**" Because we are now light in the Lord Jesus, we want nothing to do anymore with the fruitless deeds of darkness. God's grace in Jesus has awakened us from spiritual death and enabled us to shine with the reflected glory of our Savior. It's to people who have this God-given capacity for light-bearing that the apostle says, "*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise.*"

The foolish life, as described here, is a life of missed opportunities. The unwise neglect opportunities to grow up in Christ and better understand his will. The unwise ignore occasions for accomplishing the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do. The unwise don't have anywhere on their agenda the goal of performing works of service that will build up the body of Christ. And all this may be due to the fact that fools see life's highest priority as amusing or enriching themselves rather than glorifying God. Fool is a strong word, but an appropriate word, for a person who has somehow missed the fact that the Creator made us for *his* glory.

Paul goes on to mention a specific time-waster, writing, "*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.*" The Bible contains no prohibitions on the moderate use of alcohol, but it does contain plenty of warnings against the sin of drunkenness. It's fitting that "wasted" is a synonym for "drunk" because drunkenness is a huge waste. The figure I saw recently estimated that the annual cost of alcohol abuse in our country is something like \$150 billion. This is cost of missed days at work and lowered productivity on account of alcohol abuse.

The Bible's reason here for prohibiting drunkenness is that it "*leads to debauchery.*" Debauchery is wild or reckless living. Alcohol abuse lowers people's inhibitions and robs them of good judgment. The crime rate would go down and the hospital emergency rooms would not be so crowded, if it were not for alcohol abuse. But the worst consequence of drunkenness is not its economic impact or its adverse health consequences; it's this: a person who is drunk or hung over is in no shape to seize the day by glorifying God. Instead, the idol in the bottle, the can or the pipe gets all the attention.

But alcohol abuse and illegal drug use aren't the only time-wasters. Excessive television watching, excessive computer use, excessive shopping and even excessive participation in sports can be a kind of idolatry that prevents us from making the most of every opportunity. None of these things are wrong in and of themselves, but done to excess they show a failure to understand that when Jesus called us to follow him, he called us to serve him and not just our whims. The truth is that there are enough ways to waste the time God has given us that we all have to enter a guilty plea.

The realization of how many opportunities we've missed and the staggering amount of time we've wasted can actually be oppressive. The regrets could overwhelm us. Thankfully there is one who was perfectly righteous in this regard. As he prepared to go to the cross for us, Jesus prayed, "**(Father), I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.**" (John 17:4) Isn't that an amazing statement? With Jesus there were no missed opportunities. He seized every day and used it to bring glory to his Father. His mission of redeeming us was not marred by a lapsed sense of purpose. No, he completed the work his Father gave him to do. The relief for us comes in knowing that this perfect High Priest has given us his righteousness by faith. He became our sin and gave us his righteousness in its place. So that now for Jesus' sake God looks at us as people who have made the most of every opportunity.

When we understand this glorious truth that Jesus has redeemed us from our sin and from the eternal death we deserved, there comes as well a new way of looking at life. The redeemed look now to redeem the time by making the most of every opportunity. Back in the second chapter of this letter, just after that well known passage that tells us that we have been saved by grace through faith and not by works, there is this verse: **“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do.”** (2:10) Do you get up in the morning thinking about that? “Here’s a new day God has given me and he’s already prepared the good works he wants me to do.” Seizing the day not only means being wary of time-wasters, but it also means being watchful for opportunities.

2. Watchful for opportunities

Rather than being filled with a substance that distorts reality and distracts from our mission, Paul urges, *“Be filled with the Spirit.”* But what exactly does that mean? How are we filled with the Spirit? Back in chapter 1, Paul wrote about the Holy Spirit. **“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit who is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance...”** (1:13-14) This indicates that the Spirit’s means to fill us with himself is Word of God, specifically, the gospel of Jesus. This means, then, that seizing the day in the Christian sense of that phrase begins with reading or hearing God’s Word. Of all the opportunities to make the most of, the opportunities to be in the Word are the most vital. The gospel of our forgiveness is the fuel for glorifying God with our lives.

It’s here that Paul provides an interesting example of how it is that we are filled with the Spirit as we gather for worship. He writes, *“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.”* I think our typical perspective is that when we go to church the pastor is going to speak God’s Word to us as he reads the Scripture lessons and preaches the sermon and teaches Bible class. But how often do you think about the role you play in proclaiming God’s Word? You do have a role, you know. As we sing the psalms and the hymns and the spiritual songs we are proclaiming God’s Word to each other. And as we do so, we are being filled with the Spirit.

With the Spirit’s help, the edifying power of God’s gift of music doesn’t stop when the congregation sings the final “Amen” each Sunday, but the music that filled our ears as we gathered for worship continues to fill our hearts as we go out watching for opportunities to glorify God. Paul says here, *“Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”* When Paul speaks of a life of thanking God, it’s just a variation on the theme of glorifying God. Ever mindful of the fact that Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God, it becomes our desire to give thanks to God the Father in everything. How can I thank him? The possibilities are endless: We can thank him in our marriage and family life, in our singleness, in our educations and vocations and retirements, in our citizenship and in our recreation and relaxation.

Everywhere we turn there are good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do, opportunities to use the precious gift of time to God's glory.

It's one of those interesting coincidences that we scheduled our Festival of Favorite Hymns months several months ago without knowing what the scheduled Scripture lessons for today would be. As it turned out, in the verse just before this epistle lesson, the apostle Paul quotes an early Christian hymn, possibly a baptism hymn or an Easter hymn. The hymn says, "***Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.***" That hymn verse is the perfect prelude to the call to make the most of every opportunity. As children of the light, we do want to seize the day by being wary of time-wasters and watchful for opportunities to glorify God. Amen.