

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

Walking into Wisdom by the Spirit's Filling

(Ephesians 5:15-21)

Study #9

Introduction: Talking shop...

Every specific field of endeavor has its own vocabulary, words and terms that are foreign to the outsider.

Computer programmers and hardware experts lose me in a nano-second with their technical jargon. So do physicians, scientists of all stripes - and auto mechanics.

We took Kathy's car to the shop recently and our mechanic spent a few minutes explaining the difference between PFI and GDI¹ engines, modern exhaust systems, car radar systems, and transmission problems that have nothing to do with transmissions. I was dazzled and befuddled.

We in the church have our own language, too. We "talk Christian-ese." With it, we can lose those outside the faith, and be guilty of just talking to ourselves.

Words like *saved*, *convicted*, and *delivered* can be confusing to outsiders. And, we toss around phrases that are easily misunderstood.

¹ "Port fuel injection" as opposed to "Gasoline direct injection" a newer system that does not send the gas/air mixture into the combustion chamber through the intake valve, but through a separate port at very high psi.

Have you ever gotten a funny look when you mention your *prayer closet*? When looking for a church to attend, have you ever said you were looking "*for a really good Body to join*"? Ever have someone question you after you observed "*God really moved on Sunday!*"?

Christian vocabulary can be as confusing to outsiders as a physicist's is to me. And sometimes, our jargon is every bit as confusing to us who use it as it is to the outsider.

This morning, I want to explore some terms that Paul uses in his letter to the church at Ephesus. You and I may use these terms regularly, but fuzzily. My hope for today is that as we consider them, we'll move from *fuzzy* to *clarity*.

When Paul wrote this letter (2,000 years ago), he assured the Ephesians that they were living in "*evil days*." To that we would say, "*Amen!*" Their days were evil.

The Need of the Hour - God's Wisdom (5:15-17)

The Days are Evil (v. 16b)

[16b]...the days are evil.²

The evil of Paul's days!

There were three distinct Greek words Paul could have used to describe moral evil. The one he chose is the most intense.³

Unbridled sexual expression, debased worship in the form of idolatry, and the abuse of power were all rampant in the Greek and Roman world of Paul's day.

When he wrote "*the days are evil*" he was accurately describing the times in which he lived.

² Ponerous - common word in classical Greek.

³ While *evil* can be a term used of natural disasters - hurricanes, storms, fire, disease, and tragic car accidents - it is more often used to describe moral badness. That is certainly what Paul has in mind here.

His words describe our times, too, because if you're looking for evil, 2019 delivers.

The evil of OUR days...

We can point to regions of the world where there is genocide and great injustice and oppression. Here and abroad, there is slavery and human trafficking, along with the general denial of the sacredness of human life.

These issues concern us whether we are "right" or "left" on the political spectrum. We all agree that these are atrocities. We grieve that they are rampant.

I read somewhere that someone once said, "*Mankind was created a little lower than the angels. He has been getting lower ever since.*"⁴

Paul's observation on the times - ***the days are evil*** - is timeless, and he adds a timely "so what" to his observation.

We Should Make the Most of the Time We Have (v. 16a)

Since the days are evil, we are to be sure we are ***[16a] making the most of [our] time.***⁵

Now, you and I read this, and we may think of that new app that helps us be more productive with our time. I could sure use that one. But good time management is NOT what Paul has in mind here.

He could have used either of two words to communicate the idea of "time."

He could have used the word *kronos*.

⁴ I thought the quote was attributed to Mark Twain, but haven't been able to find a reference.

⁵ Even as scholarly a work as Arndt and Gingrich's Greek Lexicon remarks, "*this phrase has nothing to do with the concept of 'gaining time' through time management, etc. ...*" Paul is telling us to seize each opportunity we are given to press Jesus into our world.

Different ways to look at time

Chronology

Kronos is the Greek word from which we derive our English words "chronometer" and "chronology." *Kronos* refers to the relentless passing of time, the movement of the shadow on the sundial; the ticking of the clock.

But Paul didn't use *kronos*. Instead, he used the word *kairos*. And *kairos* conveys a very different idea.

Opportunity

Kairos means "opportunity." When we say that something happened "at just the right time", in a "timely" fashion, we are speaking of *kairos*.⁶

Paul says that because ***the days are evil***, we are to make the best possible use of the *timely opportunities* that come our way for Jesus. We are to (literally) ***redeem***⁷ these opportunities.

"Redeem" it!!

Paul's point here is not that we are to squeeze extra activity into precious minutes. He's calling us to be spiritual *opportunists* who seize⁸ chances that present themselves to us to press Jesus into our world.

This is something that Paul himself did.

His aim was to take the Gospel all over the Roman Empire. He traveled extensively to do just that.

⁶ When Solomon, writing in Ecclesiastes 3 said, "***There is a time for everything under the sun***" he was talking about *kairos*. In fact, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) uses *kairos* in that section.

⁷ The Greek word "exagorazo" means, "to buy back" and in other passages is used of the salvation Jesus won for us. He redeemed us from sin's penalty. Thus, we are to "buy back" by whatever means are available opportunities to live for Jesus, now.

⁸ The form of the Greek word "redeem" is intensive with the prefix "ex".

Obviously, when he was thrown into prison, this got in the way of his life's goal.

But, whenever he found himself in jails, rather than complain about the lemon he had been served, he squeezed lemonade out of his imprisonment.

He evangelized the Praetorian guards who were chained to him in Rome (see Philippians 1:12-14) and shared the Gospel with a Philippian jailor (see Acts 16)

He made the most of his opportunity. He redeemed the time.

Paul felt a great sense of urgency to get the word out and he urges us to urgency, too.

Who knows if the opportunity before us now will ever come around again.⁹ Situations can change - and quickly! It may no longer be possible to do the good we have the chance to do right now.¹⁰

The ancient Greeks symbolized "opportunity" in their mythology by a man who had wings on his feet (he doesn't long remain with us!), a long lock of hair growing out of his forehead (grab him when he is here!), and a bald spot on the back of his head (once gone, he is gone!).

There are opportunities all around us, and we must learn to see them and to seize them.

OK. How do we learn to do this?

Well, if we are going to make it our aim to use every opportunity that presents itself to us for Jesus, we are going to need insight, vision, God's perspective.

In a word, we are going to need **wisdom**.

⁹ We find the same thought in Galatians 6:10 where we read, "*while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all men.*"

¹⁰ In James 4:14, we are reminded that our lives are just "*a vapor.*"

We Need WISDOM (vv. 15, 17a)

*[15] Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise...[17] So then, do not be foolish.*¹¹

Put aside foolishness

The Bible makes a great distinction between foolishness and ignorance. Ignorance is fixable; foolishness is fatal.

I am ignorant when it comes to computer programming. But if you sent me to Programming School, I could learn something about it. I might never be very good at it. I might never write elegant code. But I could fight the ignorance battle and come away with a victory or two.

But there is a moral component to foolishness that is not fixed by adding information. The fool is the person who acts without taking God into account. (Psalm 14:1).¹²

The fool's problem starts with theology and trickles down to infect every aspect of life. Paul warns us to stay as far away as we can from foolishness. Instead, we are to passionately pursue wisdom.

Pursue wisdom

If foolishness is rooted in a person's disengagement from God, wisdom¹³ starts with God.

Wisdom is not all about figuring out puzzles and problems, and it's more than knowledge.

Biblically speaking, wisdom is practical, pragmatic. It's street smarts for God's sake. It is the "*know-how*" to get a job done in a way that brings glory to God.

¹¹ Throughout the second half of this letter Paul has urged us to walk in *unity* (4:1), *holiness* (4:17), *love* (5:1-2), and *light* (5:7-8). Today, he urges us to walk in *wisdom*.

¹² See Solomon's wisdom regarding "the fool." Proverbs 10:23; 12:15; 28:26.

¹³ Proverbs tells us that wisdom begins with a reverential fear of the Lord.

So, if the question of the day is, “*How can I navigate life’s maze to the glory of God*” the answer is “Get wisdom”.

And wisdom isn’t about taking a cold, hard, impersonal, calculating approach to life.

Wisdom is passionate, it is God-centered, it discerns the need of the moment and takes life by the horns for eternity’s sake.¹⁴

Now, notice something.

Coupled with Paul’s first reference to the problem of foolishness, he urges “wisdom.” (v. 15) Coupled to his second mention of foolishness (v. 17), he tells us to “***understand what the will of the Lord is.***”

Wouldn’t that mean, then, that “***understanding what the will of the Lord is***” is the same thing as finding wisdom?

Makes sense to me. And if that is so, then all we have to do to acquire wisdom is discover the will of God, right?

Well, yes, but only if we understand what Paul meant by the term “***the will of the Lord.***”

We Need to Understand the Will of the Lord (5:17)

[17] So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Biblically, the “will of the Lord” can mean...

There are three major ways in which the Bible uses the term, “***the will of the Lord***” or “*God’s will.*”

¹⁴ Proverbs 3:13-14 - “How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding. For its profit is better than the profit of silver, and its gain than fine gold.” 4:5,7 - “Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding! The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom.”

...that which happens

Sometimes, as God’s will is mentioned in the Bible, it is simply, that which happens.

For instance, at one point late in the book of Acts, a group of Christians who knew that there were people in Jerusalem who wanted to kill Paul, warned him, “*Don’t go to Jerusalem!*”

When he told them that he was going to Jerusalem anyway, they responded with ***[Acts 21:14] “The will of the Lord be done.”***

...His will for my life

Then, there are a few places in the Bible where “*God’s will*” refers to His personal guidance in the nitty, gritty details of life.

This is very often the way we use the term today. We want to know what God wants us to do when it comes to a major life decision - buy or sell something, marry someone, take a job.

Now, I’m not going to turn this morning’s message into a seminar on God’s will, but I will say that the Bible only rarely refers to knowing God’s will in this way.

In these non-moral areas of life, God doesn’t normally send us direct communication telling us which way to go. (and if you find that comment or idea intriguing or troubling, please feel free to get in touch next week - I’d love to talk with you about it.)

...His moral will

Most often, when the Bible speaking of knowing “*God’s will*” (or, as here, ***the will of the Lord***), it is talking about God’s moral will. God’s will defines how He wants us to conduct ourselves when right and wrong are on the line.

The good thing about this is that God’s moral will is not an iffy sort of thing. It is explicitly stated in the Bible.

What we need to know about marital fidelity, truth-telling, financial integrity, love, along with prayer, evangelism, and generosity is all spelled out in Scripture.

God doesn't play games with us. He wants us to know what He wants us to do.

And by saying what he does here, Paul makes it clear that the will of the Lord is quite knowable (he urges us to "**understand**" what it is).¹⁵

In many situations - most, actually! - His will IS stated in the Bible.¹⁶ And, He wants you and me to bring the knowledge we have of His Word to bear on the decisions we have to make.

What I'm saying is simply this. If we are looking for the wisdom we need to navigate life's maze, we will find it when we understand the will of the Lord. And we will understand His will as we increase in our knowledge of His Word.

So...

...to the extent that you know your Bible, to that extent you will know the will of the Lord; and
 ...to the extent that you understand the will of the Lord and do it, to that extent you are wise; and
 ...to the extent that you are wise, to that extent you will be looking for opportunities to redeem the time so that you will shine for Jesus.

Understanding **the will of the Lord** is one crucial tool to bring to the task of walking wisely.

But Paul's train of thought continues with the comments he goes on to make. He introduces a new term that has to do with leading a wise, God-honoring life from another perspective: the Holy Spirit's filling.

Here is how we are going to proceed:

¹⁵ See also Romans 12:2; Colossians 1:9; 4:5; James 1:5-7.

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16-17 - God's word is sufficient to make us more than adequate as mature men and women of God.

First, we'll observe what Paul identifies as the traits of the Christian who is filled with the Spirit.

Second, we'll consider the issue of control.

Third, we'll see examples of people who have experienced the Spirit's filling.

Fourth, we'll see if we can pin down what Paul means when he commands us to "**be filled with** (or "**by**") **the Spirit.**"

Paul begins by telling us that the person who is Spirit-filled (or better, the *congregation* that is Spirit-filled) is musical.¹⁷

Equipped by the Spirit to Meet the Need of the Hour (5:18-21)

Marks of the Spirit's Filling in the Life of a Christian (vv. 19-21)

God-centered (even musical!) communication (v. 19)

[18b]...but be filled with the Spirit, [19] speaking¹⁸ to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord¹⁹

Does it surprise you that the first identifier of the people who are filled with the Spirit of God is communication from the heart by way of song?²⁰ It shouldn't.

¹⁷ Given how often we hear the term "*Spirit-filled*", it may be surprising to learn that it doesn't occur all that often in the New Testament and that this (Ephesians 5:18) is the only place where Christians are commanded to be filled with the Spirit.

¹⁸ In verses 19, 20, and 21, the first word is a participle springing from the verb "be filled", indicating that these are actions taken by the one who is Spirit-filled.

¹⁹ "**Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs**" is probably more of a catch-all phrase denoting all of the kinds of music it is possible to offer to the Lord in worship. "**Psalms**" are, pretty obviously, any of the 150 psalms found in the Bible put to music (the psalms were meant for accompaniment by instrumentation, as the word for "psalm" derives from the word "to pluck" as a stringed instrument). Hymns and spiritual songs are pretty much identical, with "**hymns**" having more of the theme of praise and "**spiritual songs**" referring to something more emotional.

²⁰ A good Christian song will be true and will even have a teaching component. That is clear from the parallel passage to Ephesians 5 - Colossians 3 - where Paul urges that we "**teach and admonish one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**" (Colossians 3: 16).

Song, and music generally, has always played a prominent role in the lives of God's people.

- After the deliverance from Egypt, the Jews came together and sang a song to the Lord.
- The last thing Jesus and His disciples did as they left the upper room to go to the Garden of Gethsemane for His betrayal was to sing.²¹

Music is a fantastic way to praise and to glorify God. Here, Paul tells us that the Spirit-filled Christian - and the Spirit-filled body of believers - communicates by means of God-honoring music.

People who study these things know what kind of music relaxes people in the dentist's chair, what speeds production on the assembly line, and what reduces tension in an elevator.

What kind of music prompts a Christian to follow Jesus more closely? Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Spirit-filled Christians and churches know this and keep a ministry mindset in place as they praise the Lord with their voices - together.

Those whom the Spirit has filled are also warm-hearted toward God for all of His goodness to them. That warmth is demonstrated by thanksgiving.

A heart that is warm to God (v. 20)

[18b]...but be filled with the Spirit...[20] always giving thanks for all things²² in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father

Spirit-filled people are thankful people. They are confident that God is at work, regardless of what life throws at them. Spirit-filled people give thanks through grief, while confused, and when opposed.

²¹ In John Bunyan's classic, "Pilgrim's Progress," every time Christian sets out on his way on the road to the Celestial City, he sets out singing.

²² An early Christian leader, Chrysostom, says, "Even if it be disease or poverty. It is nothing great or wonderful if when prosperous you give thanks. What is sought is that when in affliction you do so."

An unmistakable mark of the Spirit-filled person and congregation is gratitude to God.

The Spirit-filled congregation is also marked by the quality of relationships sustained among the members sustain with each other.

Submission (v. 21)

[18b]...but be filled with the Spirit, [21] and be subject²³ to one another in the fear of Christ.²⁴

Rather than taking great pride in independence, Spirit-filled Christians glory in loving relationships. In the Spirit-filled church, members rejoice to submit to each other.

The idea is that of "mutual submission", which might seem to be the perfect oxymoron. It isn't. Mutual submission is what is required for any community to work lovingly, the way God designed it to work.

And, to the degree that you and I are serving each other and submitting to one another, to that degree we are Spirit-filled.²⁵

When a Christian - or a group of Christians - is Spirit-filled, the result is worshipful song, expressions of gratitude to God, and mutually submissive relationships.

These are in place because those people have obeyed the command to allow the Spirit to fill them. OK, let's dig deeper. What does it mean to allow the Spirit to "*fill us*"?

The essential idea is one of control. I say that because of the parallel Paul draws between the filling of the Spirit and being drunk.²⁶

²³ This mutual subjection comes before any statements are made about marriage, child-rearing, slave/master or employer/employee relationships.

²⁴ Not the beginning of a new section, but a fitting conclusion to the broader context of wisdom beginning in 5:15.

²⁵ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich Greek-English Lexicon. As they put it, "*voluntarily yielding yourself to one another in sacrificial love.*"

Filled by “spirits” (v. 18a)

[18a] and do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation

When a person is drunk, we say, he is “*under the influence*.” He (or she) is controlled by the alcohol. Paul says that we should never let ourselves be controlled by alcohol, or, by extension, drugs.

Simply drinking alcoholic beverages isn’t the point. The problem is drinking to the point of drunkenness. And we’ll all agree that drunkenness is a problem. Untold billions of dollars are spent every year in the workplace, in hospitals, and in homes to combat the effects of substance abuse.

Drunkenness was every bit as common in the 1st century as it is in the 21st. And the devastation is, today, what it was back then. People do things when drunk or stoned they wouldn’t dream of doing if they were sober. Intoxicated people act foolishly because they aren’t in control of their faculties.

Paul understood that the battle for wisdom and for redeeming opportunities for Jesus is a matter of **control**. Who, or what, will control you? Me? Us?

The Bible says here that we should allow the Holy Spirit to fill / control us.

Again. What, exactly, does that mean?

The Spirit’s Filling (v. 18b)

The Spirit’s filling as we see it in the Bible

Well, the Holy Spirit has been filling things since Day One. Literally. On Day One of creation (Genesis 1), He - along with the Father and the Son - filled *the formless void* with substance.

In the Old Testament, He filled the *craftsmen* who built the tabernacle with skill (Exodus 31) and He filled the Old Testament prophets who proclaimed God’s message with words.

In the New Testament, He filled *John the Baptist* while John was still in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15, 41); He filled John’s father, *Zacharias* (Luke 1:67); He filled *Jesus* at the occasion of His baptism (Luke 4:1); and He filled the *early disciples* on a number of occasions (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9 and 52).

We know that the Spirit filled these people because either the Bible tells us He did in the course of telling a story, or people who saw them recognized that they were “Spirit-filled.”

Our passage today contains the only command in the entire Bible to Christians to “**be filled**” with (or “**by**”) the Spirit.

So, what is Paul commanding us to do when he commands us to “**be filled?**”

Obeying the command to “be filled”

FIRST, it is a command, not a suggestion. Whatever he means by the words, we’re being given marching orders.

SECOND, the form of the Greek verb tells us that the action to be taken is not a “once-and-for-all” filling.

The Spirit sealed us, baptized us, and indwelt us the moment we trusted Christ for salvation. We need never be Spirit-baptized again, sealed again, or indwelt again.

However, if I am filled with the Spirit today, I will need to be filled tomorrow. If I am filled this morning, I may need a fresh filling by the Spirit this afternoon to deal with a new situation.²⁷

²⁶ There is no indication in Ephesians that the believers at Ephesus were getting drunk, but his words could be translated “*stop being drunk with wine*.” More likely, “*make it your habit not to do it*.”

²⁷ This fits with the parallel to getting drunk, which is not a once-and-for-all state, either.

THIRD, while I am responsible to obey this command, the Spirit of God is the active agent at work. I am called to a willed passivity. The filling must be done for me and my responsibility is to be receptive.

FOURTH, a question.

Is Paul commanding us to allow the Spirit Himself to fill us with Himself? Or, is he commanding us to allow the Spirit to fill us with what He wants us to have, at a moment of need?

It is certainly possible that Paul is commanding us to be open to receiving more of the Spirit as He fills us with Himself. This is the way many people understand it.

I see it differently, though, and here's why.²⁸

There is a passage that runs parallel to our passage for today that gives us some insight to what Paul means here.

Just about every command given in Ephesians 5:15--6:9 is repeated in Colossians 3:15--4:1. In both passages Paul addresses himself to singing, the marriage relationship, children, fathers, and slaves and masters.

The only significant difference is that in Ephesians 5:18, he says to be "**filled with the Spirit**" and in Colossians 3:16, he says "**let the word of Christ richly dwell within you.**"

So, my "take" is that when the word of Christ (i.e. - Scripture) dwells in us richly, we are filled by the Spirit.

The word of Christ (or the word of God, which Scripture is) is *inspired*. Not *inspiring* in the sense that Shakespeare may have an inspiring effect on us. The Bible is objectively *inspired* (God-breathed).

And the One who inspired the writers of Scripture to write exactly what He wanted them to write is the Spirit of God.

The Bible is the *magnum opus* of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion:

The filling of the Holy Spirit is neither confusing nor mysterious - but it is profound. We are filled with the Spirit, as we gladly receive the Bible's truths - and submit to them.

- A husband or a wife hears what the Bible commands about the marriage relationship, steps into obedience, and *in the moment* is filled by the Spirit with power to love, respect, submit, and give.
- Two Christians in conflict with each other know that God's Word calls them to unity, move toward reconciliation and *as they move* are strengthened to overcome barriers, to forgive, and to unite in love.
- You're in conversation with a friend who doesn't yet know Jesus. You remember God's great love for your friend (which you know because of what the Bible says) and *as you remember* are controlled by an irresistible boldness to assure your friend that God's arms are opened wide to him to trust in Christ.

Who doesn't want to be Spirit-filled? We all do.

But being Spirit-filled isn't about ecstatic experience or emotional highs. It's about obedience.

The Spirit of God fills us with exactly what we need to obey the commands of God as we submit to God.

²⁸ Normally verbs of filling require a genitive of content. Hoehner recommends understanding it "by." However, that sense is not consistent with normal Greek language.