

“The SPIRIT of Christian Living”
Ephesians 5:15-21
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I think all true Christians have a God-given desire to be more like Jesus.

That desire may wax and wane usually depending on whether we are living in a conscious relationship with God and feeding our souls on His Word or living in isolation from God and feeding our souls on the junk food of self-indulgence.

Haven't you found yourself from time to time just coasting in your spiritual life?

Maybe in fact you have experienced a sliding back into old habits and patterns of thought that you know are uncharacteristic of a son or daughter of God.

But then God catches your attention.

And when the desire to be more like Jesus waxes strong, we look for ways to make it happen.

Sometimes that desire is stimulated by hearing or reading of someone else.

- We hear mystics and poets describe an intimacy in relationship with God that makes us yearn for the same.
- We observe the power in ministry of some who are instrumental in seeing lives radically changed and we long to be that effective.
- We read in the Bible where people were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God boldly or healed miraculously and we think to ourselves why can't that be our experience.

But then we look at our own internal battles with sin and we grow disheartened wondering why we can't change.

In that place of desire to be more like Jesus on the one hand but discouragement with ourselves on the other, we look for ways to change.

In the NT book of Ephesians the Apostle Paul is writing to explain what it means to become and live as a Christian.

The first three chapters lay out the great truths that we become Christians by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone AND that God has and is now incorporating those Christians into one new people or society called the church.

The balance of the book, chapters 4-6, built on the premises of the first three chapters, is Paul's description of how such a loved by God, saved, recreated, privileged, destined people should live.

So Paul writes at the beginning of chapter 4:

Ephesians 4:1 "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received."

Two weeks ago Pastor Rich led us through the last half of chapter 4 where Paul says that living as a Christian means **putting aside** lying, anger, stealing, unwholesome talk, and bitterness in all its forms **and instead** speaking truthfully to each other, working for a living so we have money to give away, speaking in ways that build each other up and acting toward each other out of kindness and humility.

Last week I led us through the first part of chapter 5 where Paul continues to describe what it means to live as a Christian.

Ephesians 5:3-4,8 "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving... For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light."

Paul seems to move back and forth **from** general principles **to** specific application as he describes what a Christian life looks like.

Speaking of the principles he said we are light, we are to live a life of love, we are to imitate God, we are put on the new self, and we are to live worthy of our calling.

But as we have seen the last two weeks, he also gets very specific: no coarse joking, no lying, or stealing, instead be humble, gentle and patient.

In the passage before us today, I sense that Paul moves again to general principles that guide us in living the Christian life.

Ephesians 5:15-21

“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. ²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Here we encounter marvelous words of how to truly change, how to live as a Christian, how to become increasingly like Jesus.

Paul was writing to people like us.

His letter wasn't written to the people who **weren't** in church but to those who were.

He was writing to those in whom God had placed a desire to be imitators of God – as Paul put it.

Maybe that desire wasn't strong but they, just like you, could have been anyplace else on Sunday morning.

But they weren't and you aren't.

You are here and while it is possible that some are here for wrong reasons, more likely you are here because God has placed in you a spiritual itch that begs to be scratched.

So neither Paul nor I are addressing people who couldn't care less, but people who know there is more to Christianity than what they presently experience and they want it.

And so Paul writes, Ephesians 5:15 “Be very careful, then, how you live...”

To “be very careful” is to pay close attention.

It is first of all to think about how you are living and analyze it carefully.

To Timothy Paul wrote, 1 Timothy 4:16 “Watch your life and doctrine closely...”

To the Corinthians 13:5 “Examine yourselves...”

This past week, Bob Olson, one of our elders, spoke to our staff about such an examination of his own life.

He and some friends were meeting this summer and began talking about how much their lives would or wouldn't change if they knew they had only six months to live.

That caused Bob to go back to the Scriptures and think about what is truly most important in life and compare his present living with it.

But being careful how we live is not just thinking about it but also actually doing it.

When you see a sign in a restaurant that says, “Watch your step” you don't just think about what you see.

You actually move and in your moving you are careful how you step.

So Paul says this thoughtful, careful living includes at least these three things:

Ephesians 5:15-18 “Be very careful, then, how you live

- not as unwise but as wise...
- not foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.
- not drunk... Instead, filled with the Spirit.

For the sake of brevity I'm going to collapse these three issues into two: **Living the Christian life is about perspective and relationship.**

It's the first two that I am combining into one – since they are both about having a correct perspective on life.

Paul says I don't want you to be unwise or foolish but wise and understanding.

He defines this by saying a wise person **makes the most of every opportunity because the days are evil** and an understanding person **knows the Lord's will.**

In contrast look at how Paul describes an unwise or foolish person: Ephesians 4:17-19 "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the **futility of their thinking**. They are **darkened in their understanding** and separated from the life of God because of the **ignorance** that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. **Having lost all sensitivity**, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

The foolish reject the true truth about God and life and live as if there is no God.

They make their money and spend their money as if this life is all there is.

They live life as if their personal desires are the most important.

But the wise person makes the most of every opportunity because he knows the days are evil – he has a correct perspective on this life compared to the one to come.

"Making the most of every opportunity" is not an exhortation to be continually busy.

It is a statement about having the right perspective.

The Christian lives with the awareness that history is not cyclical but linear.

He recognizes that time is limited and he knows the difference between the important and the unimportant in light of eternity.

He knows that we live in what the Bible calls this present evil age in contrast to the age to come.

He knows there is a hell to shun and a heaven to gain.

He knows this life is not all there is.

He knows and lives Matthew 6:19-20 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

But the daily-ness of life continually tempts us to think as most people think which is described in 2 Peter 3:4 “Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”

For many, life is little more than a blip on the screen - we came from nothing and to nothing we return.

But the Christ-follower knows that is not true.

So we continually need to recalibrate our perspective.

And how do we do that? How do we regain perspective? How do we live as wise people?

We understand what the will of the Lord is.

Christians get perspective when we step back regularly and ask, “What is God doing in the world?”

Paul has already addressed that.

Early in this book Paul rehearsed the actions of God from creation, through the sending of his Son Jesus to earth for us, to the final consummation of all things when Jesus returns.

Ephesians 1:4-10 “For he **chose us in him before the creation** of the world... In him we have **redemption through his blood**, the forgiveness of sins... And he made known to us the mystery of his will... to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--**to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.**”

What is God’s purpose in this?

Ephesians 1:11-12 “In him we were also chosen... **in order that we**, who were the first to hope in Christ, **might be for the praise of his glory.**”

Ephesians 2:15 “**His purpose was to create in himself one new man** out of the two...”

- God created the heaven and the earth and it was good, but the sin of Adam and Eve and the sin of each of us since that time have had devastating effect on all of God’s creation, most so on humanity.
- God in his mercy, instead of abolishing it all and us all, chose to recreate what sin had destroyed.
- Through Christ, God is recreating a people for himself, to live in eternal relationship with him and each other.

And you and I are part of that great new creating that God is doing.

Paul calls us to understand this!

Our lives are not insignificant but eternally important.

Our lives are part of what God is doing.

Understanding that, with that perspective, we then live differently.

Our time, our money, our abilities, our relationships, our hobbies, our recreation, and every other part of our lives are lived in light of that great fact.

That’s why we shun immorality, impurity and greed.

That’s why we are Ephesians 4:32-5:2 “kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other... imitators of God... (living) a life of love.”

To be wise and understanding is to live in light of God’s declared intention for the universe and us.

You remember the story of the Prodigal Son.

It says that while he was in a far country, he came to his senses.

What do you suppose that means?

He stopped deceiving himself about what is truly important and he gained a correct perspective on life.

What happens in a man who is going his own way in life and then reverses direction as a result of meeting Jesus?

He gets a new perspective on reality and it changes everything.

Christians live life from a different perspective than the rest of the world – we see life as God sees it – as tied into his purposes for us personally and corporately for eternity.

If we are going to live as Christians it begins with a changed perspective – “not as unwise but as wise... not (as) foolish, but understand(ing) what the Lord's will is.”

But living the Christian life comes not only from a changed perspective but also from a new relationship.

Ephesians 5:18 “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”

You have probably heard the phrase “be filled with the Spirit” many times.

But what it means may still be something of mystery to you.

Some have lifted these five words out of the text and created a whole theology out of them – a theology that seems to runner counter to what the rest of the text is teaching.

There are some who have reduced getting filled with the Spirit to **a prayer** we pray **and a fact** we are then supposed to believe.

Others have made of it an ecstatic spiritual experience that we are supposed to wait for and when it happens, they tell us, we’ll know it.

Our Pentecostal and some Charismatic friends call it a second blessing, a second work of grace when the Spirit baptizes and fills a person sometime after the initial work of grace in saving us.

Some Pentecostals and Charismatics believe that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of that Spirit fullness.

Non-Pentecostals, such as the Keswick teachers of a hundred years ago and the more contemporary Bill Bright with his booklet “Have you made the wonderful discovery of the Spirit-filled life,” did essentially the same thing by asking us to pray to be filled, believe that we are filled, and then we will be filled.

And the implication is that if we stay in that filled condition we can live on the Christian life on a higher plane – thus it was called the higher life.

For most of Christian history, theologians have seen it quite differently – not as a one-time or even a repeated spiritual experience but as an on-going relationship.

I'll come back to that in a minute.

First of all let's look at the word "filled" itself.

I think some of the erroneous understanding of what being "filled" means comes from a misunderstanding of some passages of Scripture.

Because we use the same English word to translate different Greek words, it is easy to assume that when Jesus describes the coming Holy Spirit, he is describing one phenomenon.

By that I mean it is easy to assume that every time we read, particularly in Acts, that someone was "filled" with the Spirit that that must be our experience too because we too were promised the Holy Spirit.

And so we read in Acts 2:4 that Peter and the others "were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them."

Or in Acts 4:31 "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

The problem is that sometimes a different Greek word is used than in Ephesians 5:18.

The word used in Acts 4 ("pimplemi") and many other places refers to the Holy Spirit's infusion of **ability or power for a particular occasion most often in terms of bearing witness to Christ under special circumstances.**

It is used again of Peter when we read in Acts 4:8 "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people!"

The Greek translation of the Old Testament spoke of this kind of special filling by the Spirit enabling people to do extraordinary things.

Exodus 35:30-33 “See, the LORD has chosen Bezalel...and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts... to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship.”

This certainly is one of the ways that the Spirit may fill or use a person to accomplish God’s purposes but there is no indication that this is the usual Christian experience of being filled.

The other Greek word (“pleroo”) that is translated “filled” in English indicates **a pattern of life that is exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit under the Lordship of Jesus.**

This is illustrated in the following verses:

- Luke 4:1 “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert,
- Acts 6:3 “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”
- Acts 7:55 “Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit...”
- Ephesians 5:18 “Be filled with the Holy Spirit”

This word “filled” (“pleroo”) is used in reference to filling something up as when pouring water into a cup.

- It is used of filling a sail with wind carrying the ship along.
- It is used of permeating something as when salt permeates meat.
- It is used of controlling something or someone as when someone is filled with sorrow or fear or anger meaning that the emotion strongly influences the thinking and behavior at the moment.

The Bible uses the word to speak of someone being filled with grief (John 16:6) or joy (Acts 13:52) or knowledge (Romans 15:14).

To be filled with the Spirit is to live in such close relationship with him that we are more strongly influenced by the Spirit than anyone or anything else.

But how do we do this?

Do we pray a prayer to be filled or have hands laid on us so that we get filled or is God calling us to something else?

The most convincing evidence for me of what Paul means in Ephesians 5:18 is what he writes in the nearly identical passage in Colossians 3:16.

There he changes the words from “be filled with the Spirit” to “let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.”

The issue is not that we pray for or wait for some supernatural experience of being filled but that we live in obedient relationship to him day by day.

Look at the other ways that Paul says the same thing:

- Romans 8:14 “those who are **led by the Spirit** of God are sons of God.”
- Romans 8:4-5 We “do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who **live in accordance with the Spirit** have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.”
- Galatians 5:16 “So I say, **live by the Spirit**, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

To be filled with the Spirit is to be led by, to live by the Spirit.

It is to live in such close relationship to him that his values and priorities become ours.

And what is the objective of the Spirit in filling us and leading us?

It is that we might

- 3:19 “be filled to all the fullness of God” or
- 4:14 “be filled to the fullness of Christ.”
- Likewise here in Trinitarian fashion we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit.

This being filled with the Spirit is certainly not more than or less than being filled with God or Christ – it is to live in such close relationship

to him that we become like him – Spirit-filled, Christ-following, God-imitators.

When Paul commands us to be filled with the Spirit he is not telling us to pray for some immediate, overwhelming experience evidenced by supernatural power or feeling.

There are those who think that unless they see evidence like that in Acts 4 they aren't being filled.

And this expectation has people going to every new preacher or seminar leader who promise to have found the “secret” to the spirit-filled life.

People chase after an experience seeking an instantaneous transformation instead of appropriating the means that God has provided by which we are changed over time by God's Spirit.

But I will quickly add that if there is a danger of expecting too much, too soon in being filled, there is also a danger of expecting too little, too late.

Having spoken of one danger of misinterpreting this passage, let me speak of another.

This second danger is to not take being “filled” seriously enough – to act as if we just muddle through life, attempting to grow on our own.

No, Paul says, be careful how you live.

We are to live in relationship with God and expectation – praying and using the means of grace.

Don't **grieve the Spirit** (4:30) by yielding ourselves to sinful desires, **or quench the Spirit** by ignoring his promptings in our lives.

We are called to live with an awareness of the Spirit's presence.

We are called to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly – read it, understand it, and live it, for that's the primary means by which the Spirit fills us to all the fullness of God and Christ.

How do we live the Christian life?

Paul says it comes from living carefully through a right perspective on life and a close relationship with the Spirit.

These two things can make all the difference.

- Will I live with eternity in view?
- Will I live in such a conscious awareness of the Spirit's presence that his values and priorities influence all I do?