

WISE AND SPIRIT-FILLED LIVING

Pentecost 12 Year B

1 Kgs. 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Ps. 111; Eph. 5:15-20; Jn. 6:51-58

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It was Winston Churchill who once said, “Success is a series of failures strung together with enthusiasm.”

Living the Christian life is something that none of us, I would hazard to guess, find easy. If you do find it easy, then please come and tell me your secret. Either you know something I don't know or I know something you don't know. I will leave it up to you to figure out which one it is. Nevertheless, it would seem apparent that sometimes our lives seem to be characterised more by failure rather than by success. No matter how hard we try, there isn't a day goes by that we haven't failed God in some way. We get angry over something insignificant, we say something that we immediately regret, we fail to do something that will bless another person, or we just close our eyes to the needs around us. Whether it's large or small, we just can't seem to help ourselves.

The Scriptures tell us that we are supposed to live a fulfilling Christian life—worshipping God, being dependant on God for all our needs, and in fellowship with one another. But if living the Christian life is so difficult, how can we possibly ever expect to be successful at it? What's the secret that enables you and I to live the Christian life in a manner that glorifies God and is responsive to the needs of those around us?

After explaining, in earlier parts of his letter, how Christians ought to behave, through right attitudes, right speech and right action, and that their behaviour should always seek to be building up the body of Christ rather than tearing it down, and by pointing out that our motivation for doing this is our forgiveness in Christ, Paul, in this part of his letter to the Ephesians, then goes on to outline the essential principles that enable a person to be able to live in such a way.

What are those things that set apart those people who successfully live the Christian life from those who do not?

The first thing he tells us is that we are to be wise instead of foolish.

Now, we all take care over those things, which seem to us to matter the most, don't we?—our job, our education, our home and family, our hobbies, the way we dress and look after ourselves. These are things that are important to us and so we are generally fairly careful about the way in which we behave in these areas—or at least we should be. So as Christians, who value highly our Christian behaviour, we must also take care over our Christian life. We must treat it as the serious thing it is. That's why Paul exhorts us to watch carefully how we live. In order to live the Christian life the way God wants us to, something more is required than simple Christian Commitment—it also requires a not-

insignificant amount of wisdom. Walking in the light of Christ, therefore, is only possible if we take care that our conduct is not only characterised by commitment but also characterised by wisdom.

The first thing Paul tells us about wise people, is that they make the most of their time.

Wise people know that time is a precious commodity. All of us have the same amount of time at our disposal, with sixty minutes in every hour and twenty-four hours in every day. None of us can stretch time. But wise people use it to the fullest possible advantage—they don't waste it.

Do any of you remember the movie, Ground hog Day? It's all about making the most of the time you have.

Jonathan Edwards, the philosopher and theologian who became God's instrument in the "Great Awakening" in America in the 1730s, wrote in the seventieth of his famous Resolutions just before his twentieth birthday: "Resolved: Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I can." (He was 20, folks! And it was his 70th resolution.)

Those who are wise, then, will have the right attitude to time, using it to discover and practice the will of God. It's what's termed "redeeming the time"—using it to the fullest advantage, while we wait for the consummation of the age—not losing any opportunity to do good. It's also recognising that the times in which we live are evil. Wise Christians are those who recognise the ethos and culture of the day, which rejects God and lives only to tear down those things that are wholesome and godly.

While the time in which we live may seem predominately evil, it is nevertheless a time of opportunity for us—the acceptable time of salvation and of response to that salvation—the time in which to produce good works to counteract the evil that is around us.

The second thing, Paul tells us about wise people, is that they discern the will of God.

Living requires wisdom and wisdom comes from knowing what the will of the Lord is. There is nothing more important than discovering and doing the will of God—a life that is dependent on Christ's direction. Therefore, those who are wise will understand what the will of the Lord is. This is the heart of wisdom.

Throughout the letter to the Ephesians, Paul has been teaching about the will of Christ, and here he is continuing to elaborate it. In its most immediate context, understanding the Lord's will is avoiding being foolish by understanding the nature of the present time in which we live and making the most of opportunities for doing good.

But wisdom is not the only thing necessary for Christians to live their lives. As well as wisdom, leading us to the proper use of our time and understanding the will of the Lord, Paul tells us that Christians also need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Paul has already told his readers that they have been “sealed” with the Holy Spirit, and that they must not “grieve” the Holy Spirit. Now he encourages them “be filled with the Spirit”. There is no greater secret of holiness than the infilling of him whose very nature and name are “holy”.

Paul then contrasts being filled with the Spirit with being drunk. For Paul, drunkenness was a prime characteristic of the darkness—sobriety by contrast is seen as a quality of the light. Drunkenness represents foolishness—while being filled with the Spirit is the prerequisite for wisdom. Both involve the self coming under the control of an external power, although that’s where the similarity ends. Under the influence of alcohol a person loses self-control, but it would be wrong to assume that under the influence of the Holy Spirit one also loses control. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit we do not lose control, we gain it.

Alcohol, in spite of what some people might believe, is not a stimulant, it’s a depressant. And the first things it depresses are the highest centres of all in the brain. All the areas that give a person self-control, wisdom, understanding, discrimination—everything that makes a person behave at his or her very best and highest. What the Holy Spirit does is the exact opposite. If you were to put the Holy Spirit into a medical textbook, it would be put under the heading of stimulant, for that is what the Spirit does. The Holy Spirit stimulates our every faculty—the mind and the intellect, the heart and the will.

The command to be filled with the Spirit stands at the centre of the passage and has links with what precedes—wisdom—as well as with what follows—worship. It is, in a way, the connecting tissue that brings both together. The Spirit provides the power for both aspects of Christian living. Drunkenness leads to disorderly and corrupt behaviour, but being filled with the Spirit produces very different results—fellowship, praise and thanksgiving. All this is within the context of corporate worship—which is the natural consequence of being filled with the Spirit. There are three things to note here:

First, Spirit-filled Christians fellowship together.

The psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are, in some part, our addressing of one another in the gathered assembly. They serve as a means of guidance, instruction and exhortation. Whenever we as Christians assemble, we love to sing both to God and to each other. Not all of the songs we sing in church are directed towards God—although that should probably be the emphasis of our worship. Some songs are expressions of encouragement to each other. They are an expression of the corporate nature of our

worship, and they are spiritual because they are inspired by the Spirit and display the life of the Spirit.

Second, Spirit-filled Christians worship together.

Here we are not singing “to one another” but “to the Lord”. Believers who are filled with the Spirit also delight in singing the praise of Christ, and such praise does not just come from the lips but from our innermost being—from our heart—where the Spirit himself dwells within us. We make music in our hearts for the ears of Christ.

Third, Spirit-filled Christians give thanks together.

In addition to singing to each other and singing to Christ, believers who are filled with the Spirit will give thanks to Christ—again primarily in the context of public worship. However, the attitude of thanksgiving that’s expressed in our worship should also be one that permeates our whole lives. We should give thanks not just sometimes for some things but should always give thanks to Christ who is our sufficiency in all things. Our thanks is directed to the ultimate giver of all good things, to the one who is both God and Father, and is offered in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

The focus of the passage we are looking at today, is again on us and the conduct that’s required of us if we are to be distinct from the surrounding society—something that is getting harder day by day. Christian conduct can be summed up in terms of wise living that discerns the times and the Lord’s will, an openness to and appropriation of the power of the Spirit, and a participation in corporate worship that is full of song, praise, and thanksgiving.

Being filled with the Spirit involves not simply private mystical experiences but corporate worship and relationships. It’s precisely the experience of being filled with the Spirit that gives us understanding of God’s will for our lives, and it’s through our worship that our knowledge of God’s will is prompted. In this way, our Christian worship can be seen to make a vital contribution to the way in which a person can live wisely in the world.

The central message of this passage is that, as Christians, we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit—and we are to go on being filled. The fullness of the Spirit, however, is not something that is continuously renewed by some mystical experience but by consistent believing and obedient application of God's will.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.