

Semicontinuous
1 Kgs. 2:10–12;
3:3–14
Ps. 111

Complementary
Prov. 9:1–6
Ps. 34:9–14
Eph. 5:15–20
John 6:51–58

Wise in the Spirit

Goal for the Session *Following Ephesians’ advice to be wise and filled with the Spirit, adults will plan ways to live wisely.*

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Ephesians 5:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Jaime Clark-Soles

Our passage juxtaposes two apparently incongruent facts that mark our daily existence: at one and the same time, the author declares that “the days are evil” (v. 16) *and* enjoins us “always and for everything give thanks to God in the name of Jesus” (v. 20, my translation). Has he forgotten by verse 20 what he declared in verse 16? No more than we have forgotten the prayers of the people by the time we sing the doxology. Indeed, we know this world of which he speaks, and if the language is to be at all useful, it has to cover the whole range of human experience, from realism to hope. Ephesians does this especially well.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” G. Porter Taylor

We are called to give thanks always and everywhere. Give “thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20). This attitude of thanksgiving requires a radical openness to existence. We are to receive the day the Lord has made, certain that God is in it. Paul certainly distinguishes between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, but he refuses to limit God’s sovereignty or God’s presence. This is not a gnostic world; rather, it is God’s world and God is in all of it.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Paul V. Marshall

Both testaments reject “worldly” wisdom and offer advice on how to be wise in a godly way. This passage repeats the exhortation. The mark of the wise, according to this passage, is using time wisely, and using it to change the world. “Making the most” of the time, or more familiarly, “redeeming” the time (v. 16) carries with it the urgency of a shopper snatching up a bargain. Grab it while you can, the writer urges here. We all know that time we do not use is lost, but once again in Ephesians the writer adds purpose to what might be merely a statement of the wrong to be avoided or the virtue to be acquired.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Richard F. Ward

The value of drunkenness (v. 18) is not as a particular behavior, but as a metaphor. When the church is out of touch with its vocation, it moves through these evil times as one who is intoxicated—satiated and reeling, engaging in regrettable behaviors. If a quest for spiritual formation and maturity in the church displays a desire for balance and integration, drunkenness is the condition of being unfocused, off balance, and out of kilter with “what God wants for you” (v. 17 CEV). So how do we fill in the blank: “The church’s vocation is _____”?

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Ephesians 5:15–20

Focus on Your Teaching

Adults lead busy lives packed with many responsibilities. In all their frantic activity, they may feel a deep hunger for something missing. Today's focus scripture provides some guidance about the proper use of time and how to renew a right spirit within. Some adults may have negative experiences of rules about Christian conduct. Many adults have been taught that biblical rules must be followed to the letter, without understanding the context. Today's discussion offers a chance to talk about some of the rules in the larger contexts in early Christianity, to better understand how to live in the Spirit today.

God, fill me with your Spirit as I prepare to teach this lesson, and help me to be thankful. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- paper
- pens
- board or newsprint
- markers

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 2, paper, pens
- option 2: Resource Sheet 1, newsprint, paper, pens, markers or crayons
- option 3: hymnbooks

Gnostics believed that the material world was dark, evil, and separate from God. One must obtain secret spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*) to escape and see God's light. The Bible affirms that God created the world and is always present with us.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome adults and introduce any visitors.

Form pairs or groups of three. Ask participants to first think about the types of activities that fill their week, such as what they do at work, with family, for recreation and leisure, at church or prayer, in volunteering, or in study. Encourage them to identify which activities bring a sense of wholeness or fulfillment and which activities deplete their energy without giving anything back. Have them give a few examples to their partners of activities that bring fulfillment and those that deplete their energy. Bring the group back together and invite participants to name activities that enrich them and activities that distract or deplete them. Say that today's text and discussion may help them reflect about choosing how best to devote their energies.

Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

God, thank you for this community. Open our hearts to be filled with your Spirit. Amen.

EXPLORING

Have a volunteer read Ephesians 5:15–20. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Be Careful How You Live) and allow a few minutes for participants to read up to, but not including, the questions for reflection. Encourage them to mark statements that describe what was happening in the lives of the original audience at the time this letter was written and to note any questions they have.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Ephesians 5:15–20), and ask participants to read the "What?" excerpt. Ask:

✿ In what ways were the days “evil” and time spent “foolishly”?

Hand out Bibles, pieces of paper, and pens. Have participants read Ephesians 4:17–5:20 while looking for examples of behaviors Ephesians encourages Christians to embrace and behaviors to discard.

Draw a line down the middle of a piece of newsprint or the board. Title the left side “Behaviors for Christians to discard.” Ask: *What behaviors were Christians being asked to discard?* Write down participants’ examples. Ask: *How did these behaviors distract the church from the work of the Holy Spirit?*

Title the right side of the paper or board “Behaviors for Christians to embrace.” Ask: *What behaviors were Christians being asked to embrace?* Write down participants’ answers. Ask: *How did these behaviors help build up the church?*

Have participants read the “Where?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Ask:

✿ Why do you think the author of Ephesians emphasizes praising God and being filled with the Spirit in the midst of evil times?

To transition to Responding, ask participants to read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Ask:

✿ How can Christians make the most of time today?

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

1. **Ephesians Today** Ephesians sets a high moral standard for Christians. This activity will help participants explore their beliefs about Christian conduct in today’s society.

Have participants refer to the questions for reflection on Resource Sheet 2. Lead a discussion of these questions. At the end of the discussion, have participants think of at least one “foolish” behavior that they regularly commit. Ask them to consider how such behavior distracts them from more productive uses of time. Finally, challenge them to try to correct this behavior in the coming weeks.

2. **Wise Use of Time** Ephesians talks about the wise use of time. This activity will help adults focus on how they use time and evaluate ways to live more thankfully and in service to God. Hand out pieces of paper, pens, and crayons or markers. Tell participants to draw a circle that fills the page, then to divide it into pie wedges that represent the percentage of time they spend on weekly activities, which might include work, school, errands, family, leisure or hobbies, house or yard work, fitness or sports, Bible study or prayer, charitable activities, television, or computer or phone use. Tell participants to set their drawing aside for the moment, and you will return to it.

Have participants read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Ask: *How would you fill in the blank, “My spiritual vocation is _____” and “the church’s vocation*

The intention of verse 18 is not to prohibit drinking alcohol. Rather, it warns against overindulging in anything that leads to foolish behavior or that intoxicates us and turns our attention away from the work of the Holy Spirit.

is _____”? Record these responses on newsprint and post them where they can be seen for Closing.

Distribute a second sheet of paper and ask participants to draw another circle and to divide it into pie wedges that represent the percentage of time Ephesians may be suggesting Christians spend on activities that are a “wise” use of time. (For ideas, participants may refer to items they listed on the newsprint in the “Behaviors for Christians to embrace” column from Exploring.)

Invite volunteers to reflect on their two time charts and consider the difference between the Christian ideal to which Ephesians aspires and the actual way they use time. Invite a few volunteers to show their models, but assure participants that they do not have to show their chart to the group, if it is too personal. Direct the group to keep their time charts and use them during the coming weeks and months in prayer as they ask for guidance in the wise use of time.

If time permits, hand out index cards and pens. Invite participants to write down the words of a stanza or two of a hymn that they find especially inspiring as a prayer of thanks. Invite participants to write a note to go with the stanzas and send the card to someone who needs encouragement.

- 3. Singing Praise** The letter to the Ephesians is brimming over with prayers of gratitude and praise to God. This activity will allow participants to discover and reaffirm their own denominational traditions in praise and thanksgiving as they practice sharing gratitude with others.

Hand out hymnbooks. Ask participants to find their favorite hymns that focus on giving thanks to God. Lead the group in singing a few hymns of praise.

CLOSING

Gather in a circle. If you used option 2 in Responding, participants can refer to the posted newsprint as each person selects answers and says, “My spiritual vocation is _____, and the church’s spiritual vocation is _____.”

If you used option 3 in Responding, close by singing one of the hymns of praise.

Ask participants to offer one way they will practice being thankful to God this week.

Say this prayer, or one of your choosing:

God, we give thanks and praise to you. Help us to use our time wisely. Fill your church and our hearts with your Spirit. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for August 23, 2015, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

Focus on Ephesians 5:15–20

WHAT is important to know?

— From “*Exegetical Perspective*,” Jaime Clark-Soles

Our passage juxtaposes two apparently incongruent facts that mark our daily existence: at one and the same time, the author declares that “the days are evil” (v. 16) *and* enjoins us “always and for everything give thanks to God in the name of Jesus” (v. 20, my translation). Has he forgotten by verse 20 what he declared in verse 16? No more than we have forgotten the prayers of the people by the time we sing the doxology. Indeed, we know this world of which he speaks, and if the language is to be at all useful, it has to cover the whole range of human experience, from realism to hope. Ephesians does this especially well.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “*Theological Perspective*,” G. Porter Taylor

We are called to give thanks always and everywhere. Give “thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20). This attitude of thanksgiving requires a radical openness to existence. We are to receive the day the Lord has made, certain that God is in it. Paul certainly distinguishes between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, but he refuses to limit God’s sovereignty or God’s presence. This is not a gnostic world; rather, it is God’s world and God is in all of it.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “*Pastoral Perspective*,” Paul V. Marshall

Both testaments reject “worldly” wisdom and offer advice on how to be wise in a godly way. This passage repeats the exhortation. The mark of the wise, according to this passage, is using time wisely, and using it to change the world. “Making the most” of the time, or more familiarly, “redeeming” the time (v. 16) carries with it the urgency of a shopper snatching up a bargain. Grab it while you can, the writer urges here. We all know that time we do not use is lost, but once again in Ephesians the writer adds purpose to what might be merely a statement of the wrong to be avoided or the virtue to be acquired.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “*Homiletical Perspective*,”
Richard F. Ward

The value of drunkenness (v. 18) is not as a particular behavior, but as a metaphor. When the church is out of touch with its vocation, it moves through these evil times as one who is intoxicated—satiated and reeling, engaging in regrettable behaviors. If a quest for spiritual formation and maturity in the church displays a desire for balance and integration, drunkenness is the condition of being unfocused, off balance, and out of kilter with “what God wants for you” (v. 17 CEV). So how do we fill in the blank: “The church’s vocation is _____”?

Be Careful How You Live

“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of time, because the days are evil.”
—Ephesians 5:15–16

Gentile (non-Jewish) culture of the first century had a reputation for lax morality and the exploitation of the poor by the wealthy. Jewish Christian missionaries, including the apostle Paul, who came to Gentile cities such as Ephesus to bring the gospel and to found churches, were dismayed by the Gentiles’ tendencies toward licentiousness, immoral sexual conduct, unfettered greed, exploitive business practices, idolatry, obscenity, malice, and slanderous talk (1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 6:9–20; Galatians 5:16–21; Ephesians 4:17–24; 5:3–20; Colossians 3:5–10; Philippians 4:1–6). These and other unsavory behaviors were considered “business as usual” in Gentile culture, but such behaviors could not be part of the body of Christ.

While Paul did not insist that the Gentiles obey all of the Jewish law (such as the dietary restrictions and circumcision) in order to convert to Christianity, he and other missionaries did expect Gentiles to abandon many of their former behaviors in order to uphold higher standards of morality and to spend their energy expressing devotion, gratitude, and praise to God. They needed to become a new creation in Christ (Ephesians 4:17–24; 5:3–20).

Thus, the letter to the Ephesians lists “foolish” behaviors that Christians should avoid, countered by “wise” practices to embrace. It is important to note that Ephesians is not concerned about rules simply for the sake of rules, but warns how “foolish” behaviors are destructive to the church as the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:5, 12–16; see 1 Corinthians 6:12–20; 12:12–26). To build up the body of Christ, Ephesians exhorts Christians to adopt “wise” practices that include praise and thanksgiving to God.

Questions for Reflection: Ephesians Today

- What are some of our culture’s “business as usual” behaviors that Ephesians might consider “foolish” and unworthy of the body of Christ?
- Would you say that we, too, live in “evil days”? Why or why not?
- How do you think Christians are called to a higher standard of conduct than society at large?
- What advice does Ephesians offer today for Christian behavior and wise use of time?

Foolish Behavior