**LIVING WISELY: FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT**

***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*** ***speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.*** ***Sing and make music from 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.***

Ephesians 5:15-21 (NIV)

In this paragraph Paul makes two assumptions; first, that Christians are wise, and second, that Christian wisdom is practical wisdom, that it teaches us how to live. His word for ‘*live’* throughout the letter has been the Hebrew concept of seeing our life as our ‘walk.’ It has already been noted that our Christian life must no longer be according to the world, the flesh and the devil (2:1-3) or like those outside of Christ (4:17). It must be ‘*worthy’* of God’s call (4:1), in ‘*love’* (5:2) and as ‘*children of* *light’* (5:8). Now he adds a more general exhortation to us to behave like the wise people he credits us with being.

‘*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise’* (5:15). Wisdom has been given to them (1:8) and they can pray in all circumstances for the spirit of wisdom (1:17). So their lives need to display the wisdom of God (3:10). As the context shows, and as Paul puts in the parallel in Colossians 4:5 (‘*Be wise in the way you act to outsiders’*), his thinking is very much directed to their way of life before the non-Christian world.

In the rest of the passage Paul specifically outlines two marks of wise people. First, wise people make the most of their time (‘*making the most of every opportunity’* [5:16]). The verb translated by ‘*make the most of’* literally meant to redeem or buy back, and if used in this way, the call is ‘ransom the time from its evil bondage.’ Paul adds the Greek prefix ex before the verb, adding to its intensity (‘*Use … to the full’* [NEB]). So the verse carries the thought to ‘buy up’ the time, to make the most of it. ‘*Time’* is *kairos* and so not just the space of time that each day offers (otherwise Paul would have used *chronos*) i.e. make use of every opportunity (and not just every second and minute of every day). Paul’s reminder that ‘*the days are evil’* (5:16) emphasises the danger of misusing time and opportunity. Paul’s thought here might be that the days are under God’s judgement and for this reason, the time is short (1 Corinthians 7:29) and each opportunity needs to be taken before it is too late. Did Paul see the old order tottering to its doom under the weight of its own corruption?

If the first mark of wise people is that they make the most of their time, the second is that wise people discern the will of God. They know wisdom is found in God’s will and nowhere else. *‘Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is’* (5:17). This is an implicit repeating of 5:10 ‘*and find out what pleases the Lord.’* God wants everyone to know His will (Acts 22:14). This is the most important knowledge you or I can ever know. Knowing, understanding and doing the will of God must be the highest priority for a Christian. We need to distinguish between God’s ‘general’ will and ‘specific’ will. His ‘general’ will takes this name because it relates to the general will of God for all of us. This doesn’t vary from person to person. God’s ‘particular’ will does vary from person to person and might include areas like: what career path to follow, who to marry, what ministries to support and how much to give. God’s ‘general’ will is found in Scripture but not His ‘particular’ will. We have the general principles of Scripture to guide us but detailed decisions have to made after careful thought and prayer, and often following advice from mature and experienced believers as well.

Paul has already told his readers that they have been ‘*sealed’* with the Holy Spirit (1:13) and that they must not ‘*grieve’* the Spirit (4:30). Now he tells them to ‘*be filled with the Spirit’* (5:18). Grammatically, this section has two imperatives (the commands not to get drunk but to be Spirit-filled) followed by four present participles – speaking, singing, thanking and submitting. Theologically, it first posits our Christian duty (to avoid drunkenness but seek the Spirit’s fulness) and then describes four consequences of this spiritual condition, in terms of our relationships (5:22-6:9).

Paul begins by drawing a comparison between drunkenness and the Holy Spirit’s fullness: ‘*Do not get drunk on wine … Instead,* *be filled with the Spirit’* (5:18). There is a superficial similarity. A person who is drunk is said to be ‘under the influence’ of alcohol and a Spirit filled Christian is ‘under the influence’ of the Holy Spirit. But there the comparison ends and the contrasts begin. Drunkenness ‘*leads to debauchery’* (5:18). The word Paul chose here involves not only the uncontrolled action of a drunken man (cf. Titus 1:6; 1 Peter 4:4) but also the idea of wastefulness. The corresponding adverb is translated ‘*wild living’* in Luke 15:13 of the prodigal son. Both the wastefulness and the lack of self-control implied by this word should not be seen in the lives of those who belong to Christ.

The Greek construction of ‘*be filled with the Spirit’* (5:18) is more literally ‘be filled in Spirit/spirit.’ Romans 8:9 speaks of being ‘in the Spirit’ to describe the Christian’s experience, as against the non-Christian’s life which is ‘in the flesh.’ Ephesians gives a special significance to this phrase ‘in the Spirit’ (2:18,22; 3:5; 6:18) as well as to ‘in Christ.’ It is as if the two thoughts of being filled with the Spirit and living ‘in the Spirit’ are being expressed at the same time. To make the expression ‘filled in Spirit’ alone would deprive it of the force of its meaning in the context, and obviously the only way we can be ‘filled in spirit’ is by the Holy Spirit.

The tense of the verb in *‘be filled with the Spirit’* (5:18) is present imperative, implying that being filled with the Spirit is not a once-for-all experience. In the early chapters of Acts it is repeated that the apostles were ‘*filled with the Holy Spirit’* (e.g. Acts 2:4; 4:31). The practical implication is that we are to keep our lives open to being repeatedly filled with the Spirit.

Paul now lists four beneficial results from being filled with the Spirit

1. Fellowship: ‘*speaking to one another with* *psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit’* (5:19a)

This does not mean we only sing to each other and don’t talk. Paul is picturing Christian fellowship. The reference to ‘*psalms, hymns, and songs’* (which are not easily distinguishable although the first word implies musical accompaniment) shows that the context is public worship. Separating *hymns* from *spiritual songs* is especially difficult but we know that *psalms* included not only the psalms in the Old Testament, but songs from New Testament times that were in the spirit and manner of the old psalms (Luke 1:46-55, 68-79; 2:29-32). When the early Christians gathered together they sang, both to God and to each other. A number of the Old Testament Psalms were sung for mutual edification as are many contemporary songs sung in Christian gatherings.

1. Worship: ‘*Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord’* (5:19b)

Here the singing is not ‘*to one another’* but ‘*to the Lord*.’ It is ‘*from’* the ‘*heart.’*  Paul’s expression can mean ‘with’ the heart or ‘*from’* the heart. Authentic worship has an indispensable, inward authenticity.

1. Thankfulness: ‘*always giving thanks to God the Father for everything,* *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’* (5:20)

Paul consistently called upon Christians to be thankful (5:4; Colossians 3:17) and modelled thankfulness before them (1:16; Colossians 1:3). Giving thanks ‘*for everything’* goes hand in hand with a trust that God can bring the best out of the worst situations, whether in the short or long term. Paul expressed thankfulness for his own weaknesses, afflictions and persecutions (2 Corinthians 11:18ff; 12:5-10). ‘*God the Father’* is the source of all blessing but every blessing comes to us through Christ. Our thanksgiving is rightly then ‘*in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.’*

1. Submission: ‘*Submit to one another**out of reverence for Christ’* (5:21)

The NIV begins a new paragraph with this verse and translates it as an imperative, although it is a present participle and dependant on the command to ‘*be filled with the Spirit’* (5:18) like the preceding three. Paul knew from experience that a very effective factor in maintaining real fellowship in the community was the order and discipline that came from mutual submission to each other (cf. 4:2,3). Pride and an authoritarian spirit hinder fellowship. The importance to Paul of the place of submission in Paul’s thinking is shown by his mention of submission more than twenty times in his letters. He will apply this to the everyday life of the believers in the next section but here it has a very broad application. This submission is ‘*out of reverence for Christ.’* Because our submission to one another is ‘*out of reverence for Christ,’* any difficulty we have revering Christ will hinder our co-submission (as might other factors too).

The expression ‘*out of reverence for Christ’* is literally ‘in the fear of Christ’ and is an indirect testimony to Paul’s belief in the deity of Christ. The regular Old Testament requirement was to live ‘in the fear of God.’ Paul has boldly replaced God’ with ‘Christ.’ There are other similar instances of ‘Christianising’ of Old Testament thought in this chapter. God’s kingdom is Christ’s kingdom (5:5). We are to please Christ and seek His will, just as before Christ’s people sought God’s will and pleasure (5:10,17) and worshipping God becomes worshipping Christ (5:19).

These four results of being filled with the Spirit all concern relationships. If we are filled with the Spirit, we will be harmoniously related both to God (worshipping Him and giving thanks to Him) and to each other (speaking to each other in song and in submission).

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

‘The Epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians’ (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by F. F. Bruce (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984)

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‘Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words’ by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)