

Spirits, the Spirit, & Spiritual Songs

Alright, well so good to see you guys. If you have your bibles, go ahead and turn with me to **Ephesians 5**. If you're new, we've been spending the summer walking through a book of the bible called Ephesians, which is really a first century letter that a guy named Paul wrote to a brand new church in the city of Ephesus. And since we're a fairly new church as well, we figured there might be a few things we could learn from it. So in the part of the book we're in now, he's getting immensely practical and down-to-earth about how we ought to live as followers of Jesus.

And today we've got what looks like quite the **random assortment** of practical instructions from Paul. In fact, as you heard Hayden read that passage just now, you may have been thinking *what in the world do any of those things have to do with each other?* Paul jumps from wisdom, to how we use our time, to God's will, to *alcohol*, to being filled with the Spirit, to *singing* to one another? This passage *reads* a little like how the junk drawer in your kitchen *looks*. Like in what world do all these things belong in the same place? But what we're gonna see today is that they are all—believe it or not—connected.

So let's **take a look**, starting in v. 15:

[15] Be very careful, then, how you live—

The translation **"be careful"** might be a little confusing. Because to us, "being careful" to us sounds like it puts us on the defensive. Growing up, my mom only told me to "be careful" when she was nearly convinced something horrible was going to happen to me. But here it doesn't really mean that—it just means "to be thoughtful, perceptive, *to be intentional*" *in how we live*. That's what Paul is telling us to do. **As followers of Jesus we are to be intentional with how we go about our lives.** Which sounds great—who doesn't want to live intentionally? But while desirable, it's also very *vague*. So what Paul does in the rest of the passage is describe what it looks like to live intentionally. He gives us specifics on what that means. Starting in the second half of v. 15:

not as unwise but as wise,

So the first part of living intentionally is living in wisdom. Keep in mind that **wisdom in the bible is not just possessing knowledge, but knowing how to act on that knowledge. Not just knowing things, but knowing what you do with what you know.** So according to the bible, you can be the most intelligent person alive and still not be wise. Because wisdom is knowing how to *implement* the knowledge that you have. And one thing that wisdom involves is, v. 16...

[16] making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

The most literal translation of what he says here would be something like **"redeeming the season."** So **being wise means understanding the season you're currently in, and how to leverage it for your own good and the good of those around you. The worst thing you can do, from the perspective of wisdom, is to just float through your life, not thinking about how the season you're in might be used to its fullest advantage.** But wisdom looks like constantly asking the question, *what season am I in, and how can I make the most of it?*

For example, **college students** in the room: you will never have more free time than you do right now. I promise you. When you can write “nap” into your daily schedule, that says something. So here’s what I’d encourage you with: *redeem* that season that you’re in. So you could use all that free time to play as much of the game *Fortnite* as you possibly can. But that’s probably not walking in wisdom. Walking in wisdom would probably look like finding ways to use that free time to pour into other people, to build relationships with people in your classes that don’t follow Jesus—getting involved in extracurriculars where you can connect with other people. **Single young professionals** in the room, a lot of you have more expendable income than you ever will again right now. (Not all of you—but a lot of you) So use that to *redeem* the season you’re in. Look for creative ways to be generous with your money, creative ways to bless other people, take people out to a nice dinner and grab the check. **Parents**, you have no free time and probably very little extra money. But because of your kid, you have regular access to a massive mission field in our city that other people would have a hard time breaking into—other parents with kids. Just by taking your kid out in public, there’s a decent chance you’re gonna get to interact with other parents you come into contact with. So *redeem* that season you’re in. **Empty nesters and older folks in our church**, you have a *wealth* of wisdom under your belt when it comes to how to be (and maybe inversely how *not* to be) a human being. *Redeeming* the season you’re in might look like using that experience to be spiritual a resource to younger folks in our church. Whatever season you’re in currently, what would it look like to *redeem* it? That’s what I think Paul is getting at.

For some of us, a **very tangible, specific application** of this idea is that we need to make, and *keep*, a **calendar**. **Ana and I** have a night each week where we sit down and look at our calendar for the next two weeks: who can we have over? How can we connect with people in our LifeGroup, with our neighbors, with people that don’t know Jesus? Where do we need to make sure we have a night in or a night together, so that we’re not running ragged? We try to ask all of those questions as we look at our calendar for the next two weeks. That, for us, is learning to “redeem the season” we’re in. Because without doing that, we’d start to believe that we’re “just too busy” for our LifeGroup and our neighbors—when really all it was is that we didn’t plan well for it. But by having a rhythm of sitting down and looking at our calendar each week, we can be wise in what we do with our time. We can redeem the season we’re in.

Okay, but on the subject of keeping a calendar, let me speak to two different types of people in this room. **Type-A** folks in here, listen up: keeping a calendar is going to come very naturally to you. Your response to me saying “keep a calendar” was “what kind of awful people don’t already have a calendar?” Your calendar is your *life*. Here’s what’s probably gonna be hard for you though: *learning how to make time for things that aren’t on your calendar*. **Even things that weren’t on your calendar can be “making the most of every opportunity.”** The lunch that goes longer than the hour block you had it scheduled for. Spending that extra thirty minutes with your kids instead of getting done that thing you needed to get done. Those things are gonna blow up your calendar. But that doesn’t mean they’re bad. **Any time given for the good of others and the kingdom is “making the most of the opportunity”—even if you didn’t plan for it.** Don’t be so married to your schedule that you can’t make space for people in the midst of it. Now, folks who are more **Type-B** in the room: you need a calendar. Your problem is probably that you don’t put anything *on* your calendar, and even if you do, everything is just penciled in, with a very light, easily-erasable pencil. It’s only on your calendar until something better comes up. And that isn’t making the most of every opportunity either—that’s living selfishly with your time. **If a person is counting on you for something, make every effort to show up when you said you would.** That might be

where *you* need to work on “making the most” of your time. We are to make the most of our time and the seasons we find ourselves in.

Okay, let's **keep moving** to the next way we are to live intentionally, v. 17

*[17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the **Lord's will** is.*

Now I know to a lot of us, that sounds like the **understatement of the century**: “understand what the Lord's will is”? Sure, Paul, that'd be great.” But he might as well have said “go be a billionaire.” It's not exactly that easy. So how in the world are we to *understand what God's will is*? Well, it probably helps to first know what the bible *means* when it talks about God's will. **We tend to think understanding God's will means knowing what major life decisions God wants us to make.** Things like where I should live, who I should marry, what career I should pursue, what I should major in. We tend to think that getting the answers to those types of questions would be “knowing God's will.” These sort of major, but morally-neutral decisions. And hear me out: seeking out God's wisdom on those things is great. But here's the thing: **a lot of the time when the bible talks about God's will, it's not really referring to things like that. It's often referring to things that are a lot more objective and knowable than that.**

Let me show you what I mean. Here's just a **small sampling** of the things that the bible says are the “will of God.” According to the bible, the **will of God is...**

- ...doing good towards others (1 Pet. 2:15)
- ...being thankful (1 Thess. 5:18)
- ...abstaining from sexual immorality (1 Thess. 4:3)
- ...serving like Jesus, not as a people-pleaser (Eph. 6:6)
- ...enduring when wronged (Heb. 10:36)

And there are more along those lines. My point simply is that *God's will* in the bible is often a very *objective, knowable* thing. According to Scripture, there are plenty of ways to “understand God's will” without having to guess at it all.

Picture it this way. When I'm at the house with my son playing, here's my *will* for Whit: *have fun and be safe*. That's my *will*. Now, he can do that by playing with blocks, playing with cars, playing with Legos, by running up and down the hall like a crazy person—there is a very long list of things he can do that are within my “will” for him as my son. And at the same time, there are some things that are *never my will* for Whit to do: running out into the street, playing in the knife drawer, banging his head repeatedly against a wall—those things are *never my will* for Whit. But so long as he is having fun and being safe, he is “within my will.” I don't sit down with Whit and go “okay, for the next 10 minutes play with your blocks.” “Okay, for the next 15 minutes play with only Legos.” “Okay, now play with the basketball goal.” Never done that as a parent. Within the parameters of my will I've given him, there is *tremendous freedom* for him to do whatever he wants to do.

I think that might give us some insight into God's will. So listen: it is possible that **God cares a lot less** about whether you take or don't take that promotion—and cares *more* about you using whatever salary you make for the good of others and the good of the kingdom. It's possible that God cares a lot less about whether you buy house A or house B, and cares more about whatever house you get being used for hospitality and getting to know people who don't follow Jesus. It's possible that God cares a lot less about whether you become a nurse or a teacher, and cares a lot more about you using whatever job you

have to serve others and build his kingdom. **Often, “understanding God’s will” has a lot less to do with what morally neutral decision you make, and a lot more to do with *what you do with whatever decision you make.*** It means living with wisdom no matter job we have, no matter what career we pursue, no matter where we live, or who we do or don’t marry. **Knowing the will of God means living life in light of what he says is true and good. When we’re doing that, there is tremendous freedom to be had.** That’s what it means to “understand what the Lord’s will is,” as Paul says in this passage.

Okay, **next instruction** on how to live intentionally. Here’s where it starts to get really interesting—v. 18:

[18] Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit,

So Paul just brought up, real casual-like, how Christians should relate to **alcohol**. Good thing *that’s* not a controversial subject at all. But the reason it’s controversial is largely because self-proclaimed Christians, over the years, have very loudly and aggressively made their varying opinions known in regards to alcohol. To the point that the outside world is often very confused as to what followers of Jesus actually believe about it.

So let’s do this. To make sure we’re all on the same page, let me quickly establish a fly-by, 30,000-foot **theology of alcohol**. **The bible teaches that alcohol, like many other things, is a gift from God intended to be enjoyed.** I get this from passages like Psalm 104. The Psalmist is celebrating God’s provision and generosity for the world and here’s what he says:

*He makes **grass** grow for the cattle, and **plants** for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: **wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.** (Psalm 104:14-15)*

So unless we’re prepared to say that grass, plants, oil, and bread are all inherently sinfu to enjoy, **we can’t say that alcohol is inherently sinful** either. It’s not. Alcohol isn’t, as my Sunday School teacher back in the day called it, “devil juice.” It’s a gift to be *enjoyed*. (The only exception to that..is Natty Light. Drinking that stuff just immediately, automatically cancels out your salvation—there’s a verse somewhere in Leviticus about that.) But **followers of Jesus are free to enjoy alcohol if they so choose**. We read in the gospels that Jesus ate and drank with people regularly, including wine. Some people might say “yeah, but the alcohol content in drinks was way lower back then than it is now.” And as far as we know, that’s true. But what’s *abundantly obvious* from the Scriptures is that *plenty* of people still drank it to get drunk. The only thing that was different is how long it took to get there. And yet Jesus still drank it. So biblically, **alcohol is a good gift to be enjoyed if you want to enjoy it.**

But, just like most anything else, we as human beings have a tendency to take something that is good and make it ultimate. To take a *gift from* God and make that thing *into* a god. We do this with sex, we do this with money, we do this with food, and we do it with alcohol. And the way we know we’ve done that with alcohol is when we get *drunk* off of drinking it. So Paul doesn’t say “don’t drink wine,” but rather “don’t *get drunk* off of wine.”

Now before we move on, I’d love to just take a quick time-out and **encourage you guys** for a second. That okay? Here’s where I want to encourage you. **As I look out on our church family as a whole,**

from my seat on the bus, what I see is a very healthy relationship to alcohol. I think you would expect, in a church with a lot of 20 and 30-somethings, that we would have *tons* of problems with people drinking too much. To my knowledge, that has not really been true. I have not seen really any recurring patterns of abusing alcohol in our church. I guess it's possible that you guys could be having raging keggers every weekend and just not inviting me and Jeff to them. But unless *that's* happening, **I think you guys model really well what healthy consumption of alcohol looks like.** And I think that shows a ton of spiritual maturity in you guys—it shows that your desire is to worship Jesus and enjoy alcohol, instead of worshipping alcohol and enjoying Jesus. So **thank you guys for modeling that well.** Thanks for embodying the ability to enjoy alcohol without getting drunk. And that's what Paul pushes for in this passage.

But it might make us ask, **what does getting drunk have to do with the rest of the passage?** What's the connection? Well, if you pay attention, what Paul does here is actually sort of brilliant. So this passage so far has been about how we are called to live our life with intentionality and wisdom. And part of having wisdom is being able to think through potential long-term consequences of things you do, and then making decisions in light of that. We know today, neurologically, that the ability to do those things comes from the *prefrontal lobe* of the brain. Now, would you like to take a guess at what part of the brain is negatively affected by consuming large amounts of alcohol? You guessed it: the *prefrontal lobe*. **Getting drunk actually scientifically keeps us from wisdom.** Getting drunk makes us live foolishly. But you didn't really need science to tell you that—all you needed to do was be around a drunk person.

So back **in college**, when I was trying my hardest to be a walking case study of why getting drunk keeps us from wisdom, I rented out a beach house with a group of friends. Our objective was clear: spend a week at the beach being as dumb as we possibly could with alcohol. And one night, one of the guys there who was fairly drunk, decided it was hot in the room and he needed to turn on the fan. In order to do that, he needed to climb up on the glass-top coffee table to reach the chain on the fan. Another important detail you should know is that this guy was an ex-high school linebacker—he was 275-300 pounds of pure muscle. Turns out, glass-top coffee tables weren't exactly designed as a footstool for that particular human physique. So the glass table shatters (obviously), glass shards go everywhere, including quite a few into his feet. And he spends the rest of the evening in the fetal position, rocking back and forth, repeating over and over again, "I just don't understand why it broke." "I just don't understand why it broke. And all of us had had a good bit to drink as well, but even we were going "really? You don't understand why it broke?"

But that's **what getting drunk does.** **Getting drunk actually prohibits us from being wise,** both *while* we're drunk, and gradually, over time, by negatively affecting that part of your brain. It keeps us from being able to make wise decisions about our life. What's crazier is that Paul isn't aware of any of that science when he's writing this. He has no scientific data to back that up yet—he just observes people and goes "you know what? It kinda seems like people who regularly get drunk end up not being very wise."

And, listen, if you know anybody who struggles with **alcoholism**—if you get right down to it, many of them will tell you, straight-up, that the reason they drink is because they don't want to have to *think about their life*. To them, their life is just too stressful, or too difficult, or too sad to think about. And that's why they drink—so they don't have to think about it. Even people that just like to party on the weekend will say it just feels nice to not think about life for a little while. But Paul is saying here that that mentality is the

exact opposite of living intentionally, living thoughtfully. You can't make a habit of not thinking about your life and still live intentionally at the same time.

So **instead of getting drunk**, Paul says, we should be **"filled with the Spirit."** Now, I have some friends—friends whom I love very much, who are faithful followers of Jesus, who would paraphrase this verse as saying we should "be drunk on the Spirit." They would say that Paul is saying "instead of getting drunk on wine, we should all get drunk on the *Spirit*." By that they generally mean that there are things we experience "in the Spirit" that are *comparable* to how you feel when you get drunk. Whether that's being really spontaneous and unpredictable, or not remembering what *happened* while you were "in the Spirit," or saying things that you don't remember, or whatever. **And with all the love and respect in my heart for those friends of mine, I don't think that's what Paul intended to say here.** Because remember, he's drawing *contrasts* in this passage. "Don't be unwise, but instead be wise." "Don't be foolish, but instead know what the Lord's will is." These *contrasts*—not comparisons. **So he wouldn't be saying here that being filled with the Spirit is *like* getting drunk. He would be saying that being filled with the Spirit is very *unlike* being drunk.**

But according to Paul, **living intentionally requires "being filled with the Spirit."** Which begs the question **how can we be filled** with the Spirit? Well, he's about to tell us about one very important way that it happens, v. 19:

[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.

So apparently, one way that we become "filled with the Spirit" is to "speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit." At the core, he's saying this happens **by having other Spirit-filled people speak the truth about God to us.** That part probably makes sense to most of us. What may be *confusing*, though, is **why** Paul says this should happen through **song**. Like, was Paul just really into music? Audiophile? Big Broadway guy? Speaking truth to one another, sure. But *singing*? Why doesn't he just say "encourage one another with the bible"? Or "speak truth about Jesus to one another"?

Well, in his own way, he *is* saying that. Well, think about it: if you're a first century follower of Jesus in Ephesus, there are **two things you wouldn't have access to** like we do today. First, the New Testament. Remember—they *are* the New Testament. So other than this one letter Paul had written their church (which was read to them, not given to them), and *maybe* a communal copy of one of the gospels, they didn't have access to the New Testament we have today. And second, even out of what they *had* of the Old and New Testaments, hardly *any* of them would've had access to their own personal copy of it. There was no printing press, no copying machines, no Bible app. **So if you had a friend that you wanted to tell about Jesus, or a friend you wanted to remind about who God was, you couldn't just get out your bible or Bible app and look it up. Most likely, you would have to remind them of something you had memorized.**

Now, **educators** in the room, what is one of the most effective ways to help people memorize something? Through *song*: How did we all first learn our ABCs—what format? A *song*. How did a lot of us learn the 50 states? A *song*. Similarly, **in the early Church, because there was so little personal access to the Scriptures, one primary way people memorized and internalized truth about Jesus was**

through—you guessed it—“psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit.” In fact, remember the line at the end of last week’s passage—“Awake O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you”? Most likely, that’s an early hymn that the Ephesians sang together. And when they sang it it would bring to mind all these incredible realities about walking free from sin and being “light” in Jesus. So in the early Church, if you wanted to remind somebody of who Jesus was, you probably wouldn’t have gone “hey I just want to remind you of what Hebrews 10:2 says...” Instead, you would’ve thought of a song that you sang last Sunday about Jesus. And you would’ve used the truth in that song (whether you *sang* it to them or not) to communicate truth to them about Jesus. Make sense?

So even though **our situation is quite different** today, I think there are at least **a couple things** we can draw out of that: First, **the method may have changed, but the purpose hasn’t. We are still called to remind one another of truth about Jesus.** You can sing it, speak it, preach it, write it in a note, put it on a meme—it doesn’t really matter *how* we do it, as much as it matters *that* we do it. **We as followers of Jesus have access to the most incredible message there is.** The only message that brings true and lasting *hope* to our own lives, and to our world. That Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection, is putting things in the world back together. **Because of that, it is absolutely essential that we all hear that message on a regular basis.** That we hear it spoken into our struggles and our sufferings, into our joy and our pain, into our successes and our failures, and into every single facet of our lives. And that as a result, it flows out of our lives into others. **Whatever you do, however you do it, get that truth from your mind and your heart to other people’s minds and hearts as often as you possibly can**—that is what it looks like to follow Jesus.

But the other thing it tells us is that **singing is about more than just singing.** I think this passage should change how we think about the singing we do here at the Gathering on Sunday. When we sing these songs about who God is, we’re not just going through the motions. We’re not just singing because that’s what you’re supposed to do at church. **We’re not even just singing these songs to God. We’re also singing them to one another. We’re proclaiming the good news about Jesus to those around us who are learning to follow him just like we are.**

On a personal note, I can’t tell you how often as one of your pastors, **I get so much encouragement** from hearing us sing on Sundays. And here’s why: it’s because I know so many of your stories. It’s because, for so many of you, I know what you’ve been through, what you’re going through right now. And knowing that, to witness some of you sing the words to these songs out loud on Sundays is one of the most beautiful things I can think of. To watch a person who I know God has just pursued relentlessly, tracked them down in their sin, and brought them into the light—to see that person stand up on Sundays and sing about the neverending, pursuing, reckless love of God—that’s incredibly powerful to witness. To see someone going through a heartbreaking season of suffering sing over and over again to God “You are good. You are good”—that’s life-changing stuff to watch. To see the various stories in this room all singing incredible truth about who God is, is an unbelievable thing to witness. **There have been so many times I have showed up here on Sunday running on empty, and then just stood here and had gospel encouragement sung into my soul by each of you.** Singing is about way more than just singing. So when we spend time singing together on Sundays, let’s remember that. It’s not just for us and it’s not even for just us and God. It’s for one another too.

So **there are Paul’s instructions** on living intentionally: that we should live wisely, making the most of our time. That we should understand and live according to what God’s will is. And that we should be filled

with the Spirit by speaking the truth about God to one another on a regular basis. This is the picture Paul paints of a life lived intentionally with Jesus.

So I'd love to just end by asking us all a few **diagnostic questions**: what of these things needs attention in our life this week?

- First, **are there ways we could be more intentional about our time?** Are there ways that we could more fully leverage the season we're in for the good of others and the kingdom? Are there ways that we are seeing our current season as something to get *through* and not something to be *used*? Where are ways we can look at our present season and then ask the question *how can I make the most of this?*
- Second, **are we living within what we know God's will to be?** The things the Scriptures say about what God wants of us and from us and for us, are we living in step with those things, or are we fighting against them? Are we spending our time so focused on making "the right" morally neutral decision that we could be spending focused on what God wants of us, here and now? Where are there clear steps we can take to do what he has asked of us, no matter what decisions are in front of us?
- And third, **are we speaking the truth of the gospel to one another?** Are we quicker to offer tips and tricks, practical advice, than we are to offer the truth of what God has done for us through Jesus? Are we bypassing speaking the truth of the gospel to one another to get to practical advice. There's room for practical advice among followers of Jesus—tons of room for it. But good advice should always follow of the good news of who God is.

Out of these things, **what** do you know **needs attention** in your life this week? Where do you lack wisdom and intentionality in how you're going about life, and what does it look like to start walking into the wisdom made available to us through Jesus? That's what I want us to all think through this week.

Let's pray.