

“MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR LIFE”
(Ephesians 5:15-17)

This morning I want to talk to you about making the most of your life. In the Mojave Desert of California there is a tunnel that was dug over 100 years ago by a gold prospector named Burro Schmidt. Burro Schmidt began digging the tunnel in the early 1900s as a way to transport his gold and silver to the other side of the mountain – over a half mile in length – where there was a smelting furnace. Using only hand tools and some dynamite, he dug into a mountain of solid granite, and after ten years he had completed half of his tunnel.

But by that time a road had been built nearby that led directly over the mountain, making his tunnel unnecessary. But Burro Schmidt had become obsessed with finishing his tunnel, and continued digging another 22 years until he finally broke through to daylight. The tunnel led nowhere, just to the other side of the mountain where nothing existed. Schmidt never moved one ounce of gold or silver through his tunnel and ended up moving away from the area. Today his tunnel stands as a monument to achieving nothing.

There are certain people – I’m sure – that you think of, who like Burro Schmidt, squander their life on meaningless pursuits, and by the end of their life have very little to show for it. There are other people you think of who live with great purpose and resolve to make their life count. One person that comes to mind is Jonathan Edwards, the great pastor and theologian who was a key leader in Great Awakening Revival prior to the Revolutionary War.

When Jonathan Edwards was 19 years he sat down and wrote 70 resolutions that would guide the rest of his life. In his sixth resolution he wrote, “I resolve to live with all my might while I do live.” He realized that he was not going to live forever – life is brief – but while he was alive, he wanted to live it fully. Later in resolution seventeen he wrote, “I resolve that I will live so as I wish I had when I come to die.” When he came to the point of death, he didn’t want to have any regrets. Jonathan Edwards only lived to the age of 54, but in those short years he accomplished amazing things – he wrote massive works on theology, preached thousands of sermons, and raised eleven children – all of whom went on to live highly productive lives for God. As Abraham Lincoln said, “It’s not the years of your life that count – it’s the life in your years.”

Throughout the Bible we are urged as believers to think about how we will live our lives because one day we will stand before the Lord and give account for what we have done with our time on earth. We only have one shot at life, and we can either spend it digging tunnels to nowhere, or striving to make every day count for eternity.

This morning we’re going to look at three verses in Ephesians 5 that call us to make the most of life. Throughout chapters four and five of Ephesians the Apostle Paul has been contrasting our old life before Christ and our new life after Christ. Before Christ there was no real purpose or direction in life other than living for the pleasures of the moment. But once we’re born again and adopted into God’s family, we now have a well-defined purpose and calling.

Last week we saw that God has called us out of the kingdom of darkness – representing sin and ignorance – and brought us into the kingdom of light – representing righteousness and truth. We ended with verse 14 which issued this challenge: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Now that we have been radically saved and transformed by the grace of God, we are to live fully awake and engaged in the new life to which we’ve been called.

Now in verses 15-17 Paul writes... “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”

These three verses are packed with meaning, and provide four instructions for making the most of life, and the first one is: **Live attentively**. The literal translation of the first phrase is: Look carefully how you walk. Paul has used the word “walk” throughout chapters 4 and 5 as a metaphor for how we live and conduct our lives. Walk conveys the idea of movement and progression towards a goal – the goal of growing and becoming more like Christ, until the day we arrive in heaven and are fully made like Him.

As we walk, we are to walk carefully. The KJV says walk “circumspectly.” The Greek word carries the idea of precision and exactness and accuracy – of being alert to what is going on around you, and to watch where you are going. When we first moved to Gold Beach, I had to get used to the pedestrian crosswalks. I would drive through town and be looking around at what was going on, waving at people on the sidewalk and so forth, and to people waiting to cross the street. One time, when cars from both directions were stopped, I went right through the crosswalk, and by the time I realized what I did, it was too late. I tried to cover my face so the other drivers wouldn’t see it was the new pastor of First Baptist Church. I learned very quickly to drive circumspectly, and be attentive to my surroundings.

As Christians we need to pay attention because life is full of danger and deception and temptation. If we’re not alert and attentive, we can easily be blindsided. It’s been quite stunning to read in the past couple of years of several well-known pastors and Christian leaders who fallen from grace and are no longer in the ministry. Their stories are all very similar – they started out well, but as their churches grew, and the demands on their time grew, they let their walk with God slide – they let attention to their marriage and family slide – and left themselves vulnerable to the enemies’ attack. Before they knew it, they were caught in sin, and when their sin was exposed, everything around them came crashing down.

The same thing can happen to any of us if we’re not paying attention to walk with the Lord. 1 Peter 5:8 says, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Part of being alert and sober is being aware of what is going on inside you – being spiritually tuned in to your soul. It’s good to take time – weekly, if not daily – to ask yourself certain questions:

What am I thinking about? What am I believing about myself, about God, and about others? What am I desiring? Who am I spending time with? What habits and patterns that are beginning to form in my life? What sins am I struggling with? Is it anger? Envy? Greed? Laziness? Lust? By taking inventory of your soul, you stay alert to the subtle ways the enemy wants to devour you so that you are not blindsided by his attack.

The first instruction for making the most of life is: Live attentively – Number two is: **Live wisely**. “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise.” Throughout the Bible there is a contrast between the wise person and the foolish person. Five books of the Old Testament, known as the “wisdom books,” are dedicated to explaining and extolling living a wise life. Wisdom in the Bible is not so much intellectual wisdom, but moral wisdom. There are many smart, intellectual people – who possess a lot of knowledge – who live very foolish lives.

In the Bible, wisdom is understanding life from God’s perspective and living according to His perspective. Put another way, wisdom is understanding the order and design God has woven into the fabric of creation and living with that order and design. When a woodworker works with a piece of wood, he tries to work with the natural grain of the wood instead of against it – otherwise it leaves a knotted mess. Wise living is going with the grain of God’s order and design and trusting that His way is best.

A fool, on the other hand, lives according to his own understanding and perspective. The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” He looks at creation, he looks a finely-tuned world, and doesn’t see God. He doesn’t want to see God because He wants to live life on his own terms. The idea that he will one day stand accountable before God does not hit his radar. With God out of the picture, the fool casts off all moral restraints and indulges in the momentary pleasures of the flesh.

One of the spiritual laws God has woven into creation is the law of sowing and reaping – whatever a man sows that shall he also reap. While the wise person reaps blessing, the foolish person reaps destruction. Proverbs 1:29-32 says, “Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord. Since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them.” Reaping may not come right away, but the natural results of a foolish life will eventually manifest itself.

This is why Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 to walk carefully... not as unwise but as wise. In chapter 4 he talked about how the Ephesian believers, before they came to faith in Christ, lived as fools – they were “darkened in their understanding,” and “ignorant” and “insensitive” to the ways of God. But now that they are born again into God’s family, their whole orientation of life has changed. They’ve become children of light, and being spiritually enlightened, they are able to see life from God’s perspective – through eternal lens – and begin to live within His order and design.

While being saved gives us the ability to be wise, wisdom is not something that just falls on us – it must be pursued. Proverbs 4:6-7 says, “Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.” Wisdom enables you to make good choices, and good choices lead to a good, satisfying life.

The longer you walk with the Lord, the wiser you become, and the easier it is to spot danger and deception. There are some very practical things you can do to grow in wisdom. One is to read the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. As you read all the wise sayings of these books, take time to meditate on what it says – let the wisdom of God dwell in you. Another way to accumulate wisdom is to hang around wise people, and observe the way they live and the choices they make. At the same time, you can learn wisdom by observing foolish people – as Solomon does in the book of Proverbs – and take mental notes of their poor choices and actions so that you will not make the same mistakes.

To make the most of life, live attentively, live wisely, and number three: **Live productively**. Verse 16 says, “...making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” The KJV says, “Redeeming the time, for the days are evil.” The word “redeemed” has the idea of buying back something that has great value. It’s the same word used of God who so loved and valued the world that He sent His only begotten Son to redeem us – to buy us back out of the bondage of sin. In this verse the idea is that the time we have on earth, and the opportunities that go along with it, are of great redemptive value.

Time is valuable because of that age-old principle of supply and demand, which means that an increased demand will bring about a depletion of supply, which in turn propels an increase of value. In other words, the more you have of something, the less you value it. And it works the other way – the less you have of something, the more you value it. The same thing is true of time – the less time you have, the more you value it, and the more you need to redeem it.

I remember when we first had kids and people would say, “Treasure every moment – they’ll be gone before you know it.” And they were right – time flies by extremely quickly. When you’re young, of course, you don’t think about the brevity of life – you have your whole life in front of you and you have many years left. But as you get older and time begins to run out, you become very tuned into the value of time.

The Bible speaks often about the brevity of life. James 4:14b says, “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” Compared to eternity, life is very short. Psalm 90:10 says, “The length of our days is seventy years--or eighty, if we have the strength; they quickly pass, and we fly away.” God gives each of us a certain number of days, and none of us knows how many days we have. I read this week that the average lifespan of an American is about 76. A hundred years ago the lifespan was 47. Some make it to 100 or beyond... my great-grandmother lived to be 104. Some die very young. Because life is so brief, we should make the best use of our time while we have it.

Redeeming the time means to place great value on time and use the opportunities you have while they last. Sometimes a store will run an advertisement that says, “Three days only” or “sale begins Friday and ends on Monday.” If we want to seize the bargain we must do so in the allotted time or it will be too late. In the same way, God has given each of us a certain length of time to live on earth, along with a certain number of opportunities. One of Jonathan Edwards resolutions was to think often about his own death. Not too many nineteen-year-olds are thinking about their death, but doing so reminds us how short life is and not waste the opportunities we have.

Paul goes on to say that we must make the most of our time because “the days are evil.” This phrase could mean a couple of things. It may refer to the persecution and opposition Christians in the early church faced. With such hardships, no one knew how many days they would have, so buy up the time while you have it. “Because the days are evil” could also refer to the fact that the world is filled with sin and evil which can wage war on the way we use our time. Satan would love nothing better than to steal the time that we have by getting caught up in the trivial things of this world. If we don’t govern time, time will govern us.

If we are to redeem the time we have, we need to give careful thought about how we use our time. It’s helpful to think of three categories of how we use our time. The first category is what we might call the “**have-tos**.” These are the things in life that you don’t necessarily want to do, but you have to do. You have to work to pay the bills, and that takes us a third of your day. You have to sleep – that’s six to eight hours a night. You have to shop and eat, run errands, and do the daily chores. Add to that the unexpected – the car breaks down, you get sick, company comes through town. A majority of our time is spent on basic “have to” obligations.

We say, “If I just didn’t have to do all these things, I’d have so much more time.” But God wants us to redeem even these necessary obligations of life. Colossians 3:23 says, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as unto the Lord.” In other words, rather than dread work, see it as a gift from God – not everyone is able to work. If you are a parent, do it with all your heart – children are a gift from the Lord. Sleep is a gift from the Lord. Each time you eat, use it as an opportunity to give thanks to God. In addition to this, God often uses these things we have to do as opportunities for character development. You learn a lot about patience when you have to wait in line or more loving when someone is dependent on you.

The second category of how we use our time is “like-tos.” This is how we use like to use our time after all of our obligations are met... the things that bring enjoyment to our life – fishing or hiking or shopping or playing video game or scrolling through Facebook. 1 Timothy 6:17 says, “God... richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.” God wants us to enjoy life, but if we’re not careful, the things we like to do can become addictive and begin to dominate our time. This makes sense – if we enjoy doing something, we naturally want to spend as much time as possible doing what we enjoy. Years ago, there was a book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and it talked about how we’ve become addicted to entertainment. The desire to be entertained is not bad in and of itself, but it can easily steal valuable time away from the things that really matter.

This leads to the third category of “must-dos.” These are the things that we put at the top our priority list – they are the things that matter for eternity. In John 9:4 Jesus said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.” Jesus knew that He didn’t have much time of earth, and He was driven to complete His mission and fulfill the will of the Father in going to the cross.

What are the “must-dos” of life – the things that matter for eternity. As I was thinking about this this week, the Lord brought to mind the Great Commandment and the Great Commission – both of which serve as good reference points for prioritizing our lives. When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Time spent loving and worshipping God is our top must-do. If you’re too busy to spend quiet, reflective time with the Lord, you’re too busy. Jesus was one of the busiest person’s who every lived and packed as much into 3 ½ years of ministry as possible, but He made time with His Father a priority. In Mark 1, after the longest day recorded of Jesus’ ministry, He woke early and went to an isolated area to pray and seek the will of the Father.

Jesus also took time to be with people and minister to their needs. He came not to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom. Jesus sacrificed His own time and own entertainment in order to invest time in people, and we are called to do the same. No one at the end of their lives says, “I wish I had spent more time at work, or I wish I had spent more time surfing the internet.” Instead, most people say, “I wish I had spent more time with my kids, or more time devoted to my marriage, or more time serving in the church.” Our relationships with God and people are at the top of the priority list.

Then there is the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20a... “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” The world needs Jesus, and our great commission is to share the good news of Jesus with people – to help bring them to faith in Christ, bring them into the church and help them grow to be like Christ. As Christians we are to devote our lives to fulfilling the Great Commission, and obeying the Great Commandment – and must sacrifice what we like to do if it distracts from what we must-do.

This leads us to verse 17 and the fourth instruction we are given in making the most of life: **Live purposefully**... “Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.” Since only in the Lord’s will can anything good and lasting be accomplished, we should be driven to know what God wants us to do with our lives. We don’t want to be foolish and live by our understanding and our own perspective, we want to know God’s perspective, and His plan and purpose for our life.

When we think of understanding God’s will, we usually think about the major decisions of life – who we should marry, what career path to take, and where we should live. These are all areas in which we should seek God’s will, but verse 17 is talking more about understanding God’s intent for the way we live every day. It links back to verse 10 that says, “Live as children of light... and find out what pleases the Lord.” Once we’re saved our life changes from pleasing ourself to pleasing the Lord.

The primary way we find out what pleases the Lord is through His Word. There are hundreds of direct statements in scripture of what God wants us to do – many of them right here in Ephesians – it is God’s will that we tell the truth, that we work hard, that we remain sexually pure, and that we forgive others. God’s Word also warns of many things not to do – we are not to steal or lie or let bitterness fester inside us. The Bible is filled with commands and instructions that are designed to guide us on the right path and live within God’s order and design. This means that we should immerse ourselves in God’s Word, and as the psalmist says, we should “delight” in God’s law because we know it leads to blessing.

When we live according to general will for our lives, deciding God’s specific will not be difficult. When it comes to daily decisions, we simply take it to the Lord in prayer, we weigh our various options, we watch to see what doors God opens and closes, and we seek the wise counsel of others. When we do all of these things and are already living according to God’s known will for us, God gives us freedom to choose who we’ll marry and where we’ll live. As long as we are seeking to please Him, He will give us the wisdom to decide what is best.

These three verses tell us in a nutshell how to make the most of life – live attentively – watch your life closely so that you don’t fall prey to the enemy; live wisely – commit yourself to living according to God’s order and design; live productively – redeeming the time and taking advantage of the opportunities God gives you; and live purposefully – seeking and doing God’s will.