

Redeem the Time

Text:

Ephesians 5:15-21

“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord *is*. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.”

Introduction:

We are looking at a series of texts from the letters of the Apostle Paul that help us understand how to keep from wasting our lives. Last week we looked at his admonition to Timothy to “lay hold on eternal life”. Today I want us to reflect on the command that he gives in both the Epistle to the Ephesians and in the Epistle to the Colossians to “redeem the time.” I have taken the text from the King James Version because it translates more literally what Paul says in retaining the word “redeem”. Most of the more recent translations have translated along the lines of “make the best use of the time”. This is not false, but there is an image in the word “redeem” that is intentional, which we should not lose that we will examine momentarily.

The text is clear enough in what it says. We should have no trouble grasping its meaning. What it perhaps requires most from us is reflection and deliberate action. We are probably all aware of truth that it expresses, but this does not keep us from being easily distracted from it without some definite action on our part. We will examine it by asking first, what exactly is meant by redeeming the time, then by considering our motives for so doing, and finally by looking at how we do it.

I. What are we to do?

If we take the entire passage we have read we see that it is an encouragement to walk in a certain way. This is the fourth time in two chapters that Paul has employed the verb “walk”. In 4:1 he tells us to “walk worthy of our calling”, then in 4:17 he says that we should “no longer

walk as the other Gentiles walk in the vanity of their own thinking; in 5:2 he exhorts us to “walk in love”, and finally in our text in 4:15 he instructs us to “walk circumspectly”. Our walk is a metaphor for our behavior. In the first part of this letter Paul has told us about the truths upon which the Christian life is founded, about all that God has bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ. Building upon our position in Christ, in the second half of the letter he tells us how we should act, how we should walk. He makes it clear that there is a significant difference between the comportment of a believer in Jesus Christ, and a non-believer. We do not think in the same way, we do not have the same outlook on life. One of the ways in which our outlook on life changes when we come into fellowship with God through Jesus Christ is the way we view time.

There are two words translated “time” in the New Testament. The first is what we most often imply when we use the word; time as the succession of moments, as past, present, and future. The word that he uses here, however, is time as opportunity. Time as we understand it in expressions like “now is the time”, or “the time is ripe”. The significant thing about time as opportunity is that it is not always available; it passes and is no more. This is the reason Paul says it must be redeemed. To redeem is to purchase. It is used elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of Christ redeeming sinners by the purchase price of his death.

Here it refers to our grasping the significance of the opportunities that come to us each day of our life and then doing what we must do to seize them. We will see this more fully at the end, but let us say simply here that there are opportunities to do God’s will, to do things of eternal significance. They may be big things or they may be very small things, but what is important is that they are eternally significant things; things that will have eternal consequences in our lives and in the lives of those persons with whom we interact. The reason these opportunities must be redeemed is that often we must give up something in order to seize them. Now this may be something so big that he means a complete change of life direction. For example God might call you to leave the comfort of the life you are living to serve him in a distant and difficult place. On a large scale like this it is not difficult to grasp the idea of giving up, of exchange. I give up my plans for my life, my comfort and security in exchange for an unknown and uncertain future doing something that is for the present unclear.

Most of the time what we give up to redeem the time, however, is much smaller, but perhaps just as difficult. We give up our lower impulses for the higher call of God. These impulses may not be particularly evil, but they pull us toward our own comfort, and the fulfillment of our own desires. It may be something as simple as spending an evening comfortably planted in front of our TV instead of doing something that would have been more beneficial, but would have required more effort on our part. As humans we have a deadly tendency to take the path of least resistance. If we fail to see the eternal significance in the moments of our daily life then the opportunities will pass unredeemed.

II. Why must we do it?

What Paul gives us as a motivation for redeeming the time is the simple statement: “because the days are evil.” In a perfect world this exhortation would be unnecessary. In a perfect world we would always grasp the significance of every situation that presented itself to us and do the precise thing required. There would be no missed opportunities. The expression “I wish I had” would be absent from human speech. But we don’t live in a perfect world. We live in a world corrupted by sin. As Paul states in this very letter from which we have read that without the light of Christ humans have: “the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart” (Ephesians 4:18). This is not a pretty picture, and not a likely medium for doing the right thing. Thankfully, in Christ, we have received new life, and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit which overcomes the darkness of normal human existence, but we must never forget that we are never far from the darkness; that the light is Christ, and the moment we stray from Christ we wander back into the darkness. This is the reason we are exhorted in the passage just previous to the one we have read: “Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light” (Ephesians 5: 14).

“Because the days are evil” explains the need for the last petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak”. Unless we are on our guard the inertia of a fallen world will keep us content with something less than what God intends for us. We must not grope our way blindly through a wicked world, but as we are told in the text “walk carefully”. We must keep our spiritual eyes constantly open both to the pitfalls of the road and the opportunities of life.

III. How do we do it?

How is this possible? Three times in the passage we read we have contrasts. We may locate them with the two words “not”, and “but”. They are: “walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise”; “be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord *is*”; “And, be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.” The three point to a common conclusion. As believers we can be wise. This means that we are walking in the light of Christ, hearing his voice, and filled with the Holy Spirit. When this is the case we recognize the dangers of the road on one hand, and our God-given opportunities on the other. When we don’t we are like a fool or a drunk person. Our sense of reality is skewed. We stumble over every pitfall, and miss every opportunity, and in the end we waste the life that God has given us.

Conclusion:

To help us clearly grasp these two approaches to life let me illustrate each with an event taken from the final events of our Lord's life, one which demonstrates spiritual insight and good use of opportunity; the other which demonstrates spiritual turpitude and loss of opportunity.

John chapter 12 tells how Mary the sister of Lazarus, when Jesus came to her house shortly before his death, took a very expensive container of spikenard and used it to anoint Jesus' feet. Judas reacted to this lavish and generous act by saying that this was a great waste since the spikenard could have been sold for a large amount of money and the proceeds could have been used for alms for the poor. Jesus, however, rebukes Judas saying that there will always be opportunity to give to the poor, but that Mary has recognized her unique opportunity to anoint him for his burial. Mary had the spiritual insight to grasp the significance of the moment she was living. She redeemed her opportunity.

The second incident takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane just before Jesus' arrest. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John and asks them to stay awake and pray with him as he faces his time of great agony. But twice he leaves them and returns and twice they have fallen asleep. Unlike Mary, they fail to grasp the significance of the moment, and the opportunity goes unredeemed.

Each day of our lives presents us with some redeemable opportunity; with the possibility of giving eternal value to our moments of time. To seize these opportunities we must first have the spiritual insight to recognize them, and then give up what must be given up to seize them.