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# Redeeming Time

*Time, Talent, Treasure Series*

**Ephesians 5:15-21**

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Isn't it amazing how annoying it is when we feel like people are wasting our time? You were beginning to wonder, weren't you? Why is it? I mean in our culture, to waste someone's time or to be perceived as having wasted our time, is a huge offense. Perhaps it's because many people think that they're really, really important, and their agenda is important, and anybody that gets in the way is just really standing in the way of somebody really important.

A couple of weeks ago Donna and I were in New York City, which is obviously full of very important people who are very busy, and we witnessed quite an interesting scene. Right off Broadway we saw a very sharply-dressed older gentleman, quite old, with a walker, and he was crossing the street very, very slowly. And of course what was happening for those who were waiting, they were honking, and every time someone would honk at him, he would stop and begin to scream obscenities at them for an extended period of time. And then he would move about two more steps and somebody would honk, and he'd stop and yell obscenities. And you can tell us tourists; we're all taking pictures. *(laughter)* So I walked over to one of the vendors who sets up on that corner and I said, "What's the deal with this?" And he said, "This happens every single day." I think this older gentleman was saying, "You know, one day in the past I was really important and somebody, and I'm still going to be important and somebody. I'll slow you down. I still have power and I'm gonna use it."

So maybe that's why we get so annoyed when people waste our time. For some, it's because we're just so incredibly busy. We've literally filled our calendars and our schedules from morning to night, and we're always running late. And so anybody or anything we perceive as getting in the way or slowing us down is just throwing us that much more off our schedule. I mean, after all, we have very, very busy lives.

One of the commercials on TV that most intrigues these days is the "Which is better?" commercial. Do you know what I'm talking about? The guy at the table with the little kids—and the clear and obvious answer for these little kids is more is better; faster is better; now is better. And I thought, you know, what's so intriguing about that to me is that by the time our kids are in kindergarten they have gotten the cultural message...faster...more...now! Is it any wonder that we are annoyed when people are wasting our time?

So the question is—we value our time very highly, don't we? Here are two questions this morning that I want you to think about. One is: How am I using my time? How do I use the weeks, days, hours, and minutes of my life? And the second question is: How does God want me to use my time? Now here's the really bad news on those two questions. You will not walk out the door this morning with the answer to those two questions. We're just going to begin to figure out how we might answer those questions.

If you have a Bible, turn with me to Ephesians, Chapter 5. Ephesians, like Paul's letter to the Colossians and his letter to the Romans, all three of these books are structured exactly the same way. In the first half of each of these books he lays out the incredible gospel that we've been studying in Galatians—all that Christ is and has done for us, and all that we now are in Him. So

chapters 1 through 3 in Ephesians are all about this amazing grace that God has poured out on us and how that has changed our very nature and our standing before God, and it's very exciting. We've quoted these verses from the first half of this book many, many times. Starting in chapter 4, in verse 1, there's a word, and the word is *therefore,* and that word is used repeatedly in chapters 4 and 5 of Ephesians. And what Paul is saying is: in light of what is true about the gospel that we've now believed and our standing with God, *therefore,* how should we then live in light of that new reality—that truth? And that's what he's talking about. Look at chapter 4 in verse 1 just briefly, and chapter 5 in verse 1, because we get the essence of what Paul's argument is from these two verses. Chapter 4, verse 1:

> **Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.** (*NASB, Ephesians 4:1)

So, in light of the gospel and all that's true about us now in Christ, we are to walk in a manner worthy of that new calling. Chapter 5 in verse 1:

> **Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us.** (5:1-2a)

So we're to walk in a manner worthy, and we're to walk in a manner of love and walk like Jesus did—imitate Him. That's the argument, and he's told them, "Here's how I want you to walk, and here's how I don't want you to walk." And he's gone back and forth through chapters 4 and 5, and we kind of come to the culmination now of these chapters in verse 15:

> **Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.** (Vs. 15-16)

I want you to notice one word here that follows after every **therefore** in these chapters, and it is the word **walk**. What Paul is talking about when he talks about *walk* is about how you and I live our everyday lives—and we get that. *Walk* is just going through our life, day by day by day, and so that's where he's concerned. He wants our daily experience of life, the days, hours and minutes that we spend, to be a reflection, to be flowing out of the truth of the gospel. And that's what he's talking about.

Last week on this slide that Bryan put up really helps us understand what he's talking about with a **walk**. Notice on the slide that we were talking about, that we were declared at the point of salvation to be righteous, forgiven, new creations in Christ, fully restored image bearers, but the diagonal line that moves with the arrow is our daily walk. It's where we spend our days, hours and minutes, and that's where God's desire and Paul's desire is that we would increasingly be living out in reality, day after day, what's true of us positionally before God because of the cross. So that's what he's talking about when he's talking about our walk. He's talking about our time.

So what does he say? He says: **Be careful how you live your daily life, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time.** That phrase **making the most** means *to redeem the time—to buy back time and repurpose it.* And I think it's rightly translated **making the most**. What he's saying is that in our daily life there are a lot of ways that we could waste life. We could waste hours, days and minutes. But we're, as new creations in Christ, to buy back our days, hours and minutes for a new purpose—for God's purpose. We're to redeem the days that God gives us, and he says particularly **making the most of your time**. Now this word for **time** is not the word for

chronological time; it encompasses that, but much more. What he's talking about is everything that would define *your* life, *your* time. It includes where you live, the culture and time and place where God has put you, and all the different spheres of influence and opportunity that you live in—*your* time, *your* opportunity (some translations say *make the most of every opportunity or your opportunity*).

So Paul often thinks in terms of various spheres in which we live our lives. He talks about our family life and how that's a big part of our life—how we relate within our families. That's one sphere, and he's saying we need to think about and make the most of the time we have within our family sphere. We also have a work life. We have careers and jobs. That's part of who we are. He is going to talk about that specifically in chapter 6. But he's concerned that we take advantage and make the most of the time at work. What is it that I'm called to do in my career, and how do I maximize that—make the most of that—because that's a part of where I live my life.

And then there's obviously what we would say is *the rest of our life*. I dare call it "spare time" because we don't feel like there's very much spare in it, right? But there's a whole lot of time outside of family and outside of work that we have control over, that we get to decide what we're going to do with it, and that sphere is also of concern to Paul, that we take full advantage and we make the most of that time.

So when he says **make the most of your time,** he's saying, "Think about all the spheres where you live and operate, and think about: how do I maximize all of that time and repurpose it for something good? And you notice that he says we should do this *with great care* (back in verse 15). **Be careful**—that word means to *be accurate or precise*. In other words, it's we shouldn't be haphazard or careless about our thinking about the days, hours and minutes that we have in these various realms where we operate. We should be accurate and precise. We should think this through very carefully. *How am I using the time that has been given to me—this time, in this place, right now?*

He says: **Don't be unwise men, but be wise**. Be skillful in this. So you get the sense that Paul is really concerned about this. This is a big deal that we rightly assess where we're spending our time and we're thinking it through and figuring out whether or not we're making the most of the opportunities and time that we have. That's a very, very big deal to Paul. It should be the natural outcome of being new creatures in Christ, that we should now be very much concerned and interested in using our lives for a good purpose, making the most of our lives, because the life of God is within us.

He says that we are to do this **because the days are evil**. That word means there's maliciousness; there's trouble; there's pain; there's sorrow. All of that is embodied in that word **evil**. These are days of evil—and it's just as true today obviously as it was two thousand years ago—that the days were evil. There's a lot of maliciousness in the world. There's a lot of trouble and a lot of pain and a lot of sorrow as a result of man's sinfulness—but not just because of man's sinfulness. In chapter 6 Paul is going to say there are spiritual demonic forces at work in the world to coincide with and come along into man's sinfulness to make it a very evil time. And because we're not called out of the culture, out of the evil days in which we live, we're called to live *in these days*. Paul says, "The days are evil, therefore you need to be all the more concerned about where you spend your time, how you use the opportunities that God has given to you and to me."

I think there are two particular things that Paul is thinking about and concerned about as he says, **Make the most of these days because the days are evil.** The first is his concern—and it's very

evident as you read through chapters 4, 5, and 6—he's very concerned that if we're not thoughtful about where we're spending our time, we will slip back and do the same things we did before we met Christ. We'll fall right back into the old patterns and habits and destructive ways that used to define our life and *do* define the lives of those who are apart from Christ. But if we're not careful, we can fall right back into those old habits and practices. That doesn't change our standing before God. We'll still be forgiven. We'll still be seen as righteous and holy. But it is an absolute waste of our life to spend our lives doing those things that brought us no life to begin with. In fact, they were destructive. And Paul names a number of things in these chapters that he is concerned that these people in Ephesus might go back and do (and perhaps they were doing). They were wasting their lives going back and doing the same old evil things they were doing before they knew Christ. That's a serious concern for Paul.

I'm just going to mention a couple of them. One that he mentioned several times was sexual immorality. It was prevalent in Ephesus. It's prevalent in our culture today. Everything cries out to us that we're going to find meaning and satisfaction and fulfillment in life from immoral sexual practices of all kinds. But if we go back and spend our days, our hours, our minutes feeding the flesh in that way, we're simply wasting our life, and it's destroying the joy and the power that God wants to unleash in us and through us. He also mentions here bitterness, anger, and unforgiveness. And why I want to mention that one in particular is because we can be participating in that old practice while we're doing something else, right? He's an illustration from my own life:

I have a pretty large lawn, almost two-thirds of an acre, and I made the very conscious decision that because I need to exercise anyway, I would have a walk-behind mower and not a riding mower, which means that every week (and sometimes twice a week in the summer under the right conditions) I have at least two and a half or three hours of mowing. While I'm mowing I really don't have to think very much about mowing. I just kind of follow the lines back and forth, up and down. You can even see me on 27th Street sometimes. Some guys honk at me—just like that guy in New York. *(laughter)* Now I have spent many afternoons mowing, worshiping God, praying for people, thinking things through, using the time well and I have also spent some afternoons in bitterness and anger and grumbling and mulling over things that have happened that I didn't think were right or fair, and just churning inside. And I'll come in for a drink, and it doesn't take Donna but two seconds to realize it isn't going well out there.

So some of these old practices, they don't need to require all of our time and attention. We could actually be slipping back into the old ways of wasting our life, wasting the opportunity with bitterness, unforgiveness, and anger. Paul mentions a number of different things here that are a waste of our life. Don't go back and spend your time doing the things that used to define your life before Christ. I think we have a second reason why he wants us to make the most of our time because the days are evil, and it's in verse 17:

**So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.**

Again he's making a big deal about this. This is the third time he has said, "Don't be foolish; don't be ignorant; don't be careless." This is a big deal! Think about how you're spending your life; think about where your weeks and hours and minutes are going. And here he is saying it's because we're supposed to be doing God's will. And what is it that God wants us to spend our time doing? Not just avoiding the things of the past, but He's got a much grander vision for your life and mine than just staying out of trouble, staying out of the old ways. Notice what he says back in chapter 5, verses 7-8:

**Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light...**

Remember we talked about that last week in Galatians. We're now **children of light**. Don't live in the darkness; be children of light. And what does a person of light, a child of light, do? Verse 9:

**...(for the fruit of the light *consists* in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.** (Vs. 9-10)

So what is it that Paul is concerned about? Not that we just would waste our life on old practices, but that we would fail to be the lights that God has called us to be in the darkness. And he says to be light means to actively be doing good (that's what that word **goodness** means), to actively be engaged in helping and serving others. And **righteousness** means being rightly related to God and rightly relating to other people—to do what's right in practice and to live a life of **truth**. Live in the reality of who you are, and that that bright light that shines out of and emanates out of a Christ follower actually makes a huge difference. It actually helps people move out of the darkness into the light and experience that salvation for themselves. In fact, that's what he says in verses 11-14 (go back and read it for yourself). He is saying when the light goes into the darkness, it has a redemptive effect. It causes people's lives to be changed. And Paul is saying, "That's what I want for you. I want you to actually be actively engaged in doing good, in serving God and being light in the culture where you are, in the environments where you are, so that you can have a real impact with your life."

Now I want you to know that you're sitting around a lot of people here this morning that take these verses very seriously, and they practice this and they think through what they're doing and why they're doing it and where they should be serving, and they're very, very thoughtful about it. And they're thinking about it as it relates to their work environment and the responsibilities they have there and how they can maximize that opportunity to do good, to be righteous, to actually be a light in that environment. There are people who think very seriously about their family life and how they would use their time and maximize the opportunity they have in each season of their family life. And there are other people who very clearly think through all of that extra time that we have. Even though we don't feel like we have very much, we have a lot more than we think sometimes if we just stop and analyze how are we using it and what is it that God wants to do with that time?

Some of us are, by nature, oriented towards the past. We spend a lot more time thinking about what has been, and that's rather counterproductive if we're going to actually maximize the opportunities right in front of us. Some of us are oriented towards the future. We're living ten years down the road...fifteen years down the road. We're dreaming dreams and, again, sometimes that doesn't serve us very well because we're missing the opportunity that's now. If you had to have the right orientation, it would be now with the future in mind, not so much the past unless your job is as a historian. But we need to be thinking now and going forward. How does God want me to invest and use my time? He wants us to be careful about that and thoughtful about it and precise about it. Don't waste it; don't be haphazard about it. God's will is that we would have maximum impact and influence with the time and opportunity He's given us.

So now let's go home today and let's sit down and let's begin to assess where all our time is going, and then we'll just think about all the possible things that we *could* do. We'll see where there are some open slots and we'll just begin to fill up the open slots with activities that we think are maybe

better than the activities that we're doing now. Sound good? Well, here's the problem: The problem is that if you and I, by ourselves, go out and try to figure this out on our own, independent of God, we're going to make a big mess out of it, and we'll probably make a mess out of it in one of two different directions: If you are a highly structured person in life, your wiring is just structured, and you have been listening to this message and you say, "*Yeah, man, I do that every day; I've got every moment planned out. I'm up at 6:47; I have my eggs at 7:02; I'm out the door at 7:25; I'm at work and I plan and I schedule, and I think that's what God is saying here. You know, just order it and structure it and get it done,"* and you're saying, *"Yeah, I'm all on board on this thing; I don't waste a minute*." If that's your orientation, here's the danger: I wonder if somewhere along the way there's an opportunity that God wants to bring your way that isn't on the schedule. I wonder if there's somebody along the way in the course of your life on that particular day that needed extra attention, needed somebody to listen. So if we're oriented that way, we're going to miss big time on opportunities that God might have for us.

On the other hand, if your orientation is spontaneity—*"Hey, I don't ever live with a calendar or schedule; whatever the next big thing happening, whatever sounds good, I do it. You know, I don't wanna be tied down with all that schedule stuff. I mean, I just want to listen to God and go where the need is and where the opportunity is, and we flit about all kinds of things.* Here's the danger on that side: The only way we have real lasting impact is when we commit, when we dig in, dive down deep for the long term and commit to being involved somewhere. God didn't call us to be flashlights or strobe lights and just occasionally show up and have a beam of light. He wants us to be lights set on a stand, shining brightly in the environments where we are, and that means that neither of those options is going to work very well. So what's the way to figure it out? Verse 18:

> **And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,**

To **be filled with the Spirit** means to be under the control or influence of the Spirit, and he contrasts that with someone who is filled with wine, which he says **is dissipation** (or excess). In fact when we see someone who's drunk, we say, "They're *wasted*." We all recognize that when someone is under the influence or control of a substance or thing apart from God, it means life is wasted and we don't have any power to do good. Nothing good comes out of that—only more heartache and more pain and more sorrow. But when I am under the influence of the Holy Spirit, when God is directing me to assess where my time is going and then I'm listening to what God says about where He wants me to invest my time, suddenly I'm filled with power and energy. You see, God gives His power away to us. God did not hoard all of His power. He empowers His followers to actually be able to do much good. And while drunkenness zaps us of all power so that we can do nothing good, the Spirit of God infuses us with real power to really make a difference in whatever environment we're in. Notice he goes on to say:

> **...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.** (Vs. 19-21)

Now the question is: is he talking about the means by which we are filled with the Spirit or the outcome of being filled with the Spirit in those verses, and I think the answer is both. First of all, it is when we are listening to God and coming together and taking time to spend with God in the Scriptures, in worship, in relationship with God and others that we hear His voice and we know what He's calling us to do. But it is also true that when I take that time and I spend time with God

and I'm asking God, "What should I be doing? What do you want for my life?" when I take that time to listen, I am filled with joy and thanksgiving and I have a deep, rich relationship with God and I have deep, rich, mutually-accountable relationships with others, there is a healthy rhythm and a balance to my life because God's vision for us is not to do more and more and more. It's just to do what He calls us to do. He wants us to live in a rhythm of work and worship, rest and relationship. He does not want us to run around like chickens with our heads cut off.

You've all heard this story. On my fifth birthday we butchered chickens, and it's a vivid memory in my mind of these chickens running around with their heads cut off—that was my birthday present—and then they took me to the hospital to have my tonsils out. I have no bitterness *(laughter)* about this. But God doesn't want us to run around like chickens with our heads cut off. He wants us to think this through with His help and determine that in this particular time and place, in what are the realities of my life, how, God, do you want me to invest my days, hours, and minutes?

There are a lot of ways that we could waste time that are not necessarily sinful or bad, but it's anything that begins to take too much of our time, distracts and keeps us from what God has called us to do. So think through your life. It will require you to consistently and regularly assess where am I spending my time, and then to ask God, "Where would You want me to spend my life, my time? Where are You directing me?"

That's why three years ago we launched our *Decade on Purpose*. We don't want people to miss this season of your life, this moment—what is God calling me to *now*?—and to live this decade, this season of life with purpose. It's why we use this tagline on our mission statement of *Every Day Matters*, because these hours, days and minutes are our life. It is a resource God has given to us, and we will either invest it by His direction in beautiful things, in restorative things, in things that bring reconciliation and hope in the environments where we are, or we will waste it on meaningless things. So we must take Paul's challenge to the Ephesians seriously for ourselves and ask God continually, "God, how do You want me to spend my life with the opportunities that I have right in front of me?" And that will be different for every person here. That's the beauty of God, that He doesn't call us all to live the same life and do the same things. He loves diversity. He loves the nuance; you can see it all over creation. So He will speak to you and direct your steps if you and I will listen and ask Him, "God, what is it You want me to do with the time you have given me?"

> *Our Father, I pray that we would take regular consistent time to listen and discern what it is You are calling us to do in the various spheres of influence that we now live in, or maybe You're calling us to some entirely new area. But we will only get there by listening carefully to what Your Spirit says. Help us to do that and then to respond in obedience so that our light might shine brightly, both individually and collectively, in this world in this evil day that so desperately needs Your light. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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