

How to Act – Part 2

Ephesians 5:15-20

¹⁵ Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today we look at the third in our series from the Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Again he tells his hearers how to act now that they have become Christians. Here he tells of "spiritual formation," used to describe a way to live, move, and have our being within a Christian identity. It is the idea that conversion is a lifelong endeavor for both the individuals and the communities that call Jesus Christ "Sovereign." For many, *spiritual formation* describes a balance between contemplation and action, firmly rooted in God's vision for all humanity, and particularly for those who are "in Christ." Ephesians calls us to such a life.

For one to be "spiritually formed" as a Christian believer, we are to be mature in our faith and to be concerned about developing character as human beings. We think of ourselves as being in a process of or on a journey toward maturity, thinking of these few verses as but one signpost on that path that provides *spiritual* direction.

In Ephesians 4:1 Paul took an extended break from offering praise for what God has done in Christ to bring God's household together, to give direction for how we are to live out this new expression of faith. The writer is like the preacher who finally hears the plea from the Christians in the pew: "So what does all this singing and clapping in worship mean for the living of my life?" "Very well, then," said Paul, "here is what you do," this is how you are to behave and act. The writer is clear: "the days are evil" (v. 16), so "make every moment count" (v. 16 CEV). Are

we living in the end times? Or is this a particular moment in time, say in our nation's history or in the life of our church? In whatever sense you understand these days, there is a particular urgency in the way we are to live *right now*. We live in times of disappointment, confusion, and danger. This week there was a school shooting at a high school football game, not far from where students and staff were killed in a school shooting six months ago! There are wars around the world, some we know of and some our news media does not consider worth mentioning. There is persecution of Christians in some countries because their faith practices are different from those in power. There are dysfunctional families. We heard only this week of a man killing his pregnant wife and two young children. Each of us know of evil in the world, whether near or far. But Paul does not want us to get stuck here and start talking about "ain't-it-awful" or talk about our favorite axes, ready for the grinding stone. Rather, he leads us to a place of light rather than in the darkness of helplessness and despair. We are to remember to make "every moment count" in "evil" days like these. **Richard F. Ward**

One of the questions that the letter to the Ephesians attempts to answer is how will outsiders know that we are Christians. The themes of this passage include Christian wisdom, self-discipline, worship, and community identity. Paul seeks to draw a sharp distinction between children of light (Christians, led by the Spirit) and children of disobedience (non-Christians, dominated by the devil [2:2]). The author expects those within the church to live for God's pleasure.

First, we need to be "careful" or "cautious" (v. 15). Careful? Of what? What is he afraid might happen if the church is not cautious? Looking through this small window of a text, we can see some behaviors that are of concern. Drunkenness! (v. 18) Pardon me, you may say, but *is that all*? So is this text to turn out to be about behaving ourselves at happy hour or the cocktail reception before dinner, and that's it? No, the deeper concern is *that the church of Jesus Christ would be so foolish as*

to miss what the will of God for it. The times are so urgent, so pregnant with possibilities for redemption and transformation, that the church cannot afford to miss its vocation. This is the key to the church acting wisely. When the church is acting contrary to its vocation, it is acting foolishly. When the church is out of touch with its vocation, it moves through these evil times as one who is intoxicated—reeling, engaging in regrettable behaviors. If a quest for spiritual formation and maturity in the church displays a desire for balance and integration, drunkenness is the condition of being unfocused, off balance, and out of kilter with "what God wants for you" (v. 17 CEV).

Each Sunday our bulletin cover states our mission statement, reminding us our focus and vocation. We usually end our service with a commissioning to remind us of our ministry and how we are to act. With the help of the Holy Spirit we are to fulfill our mission and witness to all people. And what does that look like? A group of folks like you and me, on the path toward formation and maturity, "singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" that rise out of grateful hearts.

Richard F. Ward

As Christians we are to be in haste to participate in Christ's work on this earth. This is much like the passage in Galatians: "So then let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for the family of faith" (Gal. 6:9-10). Having turned away from the old self to the new, Christians are to focus on that which builds up the body, with expectation of this realm coming to an end. Thus Christians are urged to "not get drunk with wine ... but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:17), both because this behavior harms the body of Christ by diminishing one of its members and also because it wastes the precious time left before Christ comes again.

A second theme is the corporate nature of the faith. Paul emphasizes the importance of the community worshiping together. We are to "be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves" (vv. 18-19). True worship does not come from an artificially induced frenzy, but from a community being infused with the Holy Spirit. Worship is at the core of who we are as Christians and a principal means of being transformed into the likeness of Christ. One of our primary obligations is to praise God. Indeed, the primary focus of worship services is praise of God! Worship of God redeems the time. It orients us to the Almighty and keeps our lives in right relation. We are to worship God from the core of our being. Paul is calling for authentic worship, which begins in one's heart, in the center of our being.

Finally, we are called to give thanks always and everywhere. Give "thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:20). This attitude of thanksgiving requires a radical openness to existence. We are to receive each day the Lord has made, certain that God is in it. Paul certainly distinguishes between the forces of darkness and the forces of light, but he refuses to limit God's sovereignty or God's presence. **G. Porter Taylor**

When sermons do not quite hit the spot or reach down to that special space in our souls, the hymns and spiritual odes are there to signify deep truths. They glue the pieces back together, reminding us of where we have been (v. 8, "for once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light"), where we are now and by whose grace this is so, and of course where we are headed, a day of redemption. There is wisdom in the church hymn sing.

As we learned last week, not only do our language and our worship define us, but so does our behavior. Self-discipline and self-control rank high on this author's virtue list. The mouth should be used for thanksgiving, not slander, deceit, or silly talk (v. 4). Also, thanksgiving is a key identity marker for Christians. He

discourages mockery, flippancy, excess, and any loss of self-control, be it greediness (vv. 3, 5) or drunkenness (v. 18). He is a straitlaced kind of guy whose party going is confined to the church community. **Jaime Clark-Soles**

We are to emulate the psalmist and "taste and see that the LORD is good" (34:8). In his book *Dark Night of the Soul* Gerald May writes,

I must confess I am no longer good at telling the difference between good things and bad things. Of course, there are many events in human history that can only be labeled as evil, but from the standpoint of inner individual experience the distinction has become blurred for me. Some things start out looking great but wind up terribly, while other things seem bad in the beginning but turn out to be blessings in disguise.... I also feel that the dark night of the soul reveals an even deeper divine activity: a continually gracious, loving, and fundamentally protective guidance through all human experience—the good as well as the bad.

What matters is not whether we think an event is good or bad; what matters is our discovering God's "protective guidance" in it. The days may be evil, but our lives are not evil, and the One who gives of life is not evil but good. The attitude of thanksgiving and a discipline of giving thanks in worship keeps our orientation to God on the right keel. **G. Porter Taylor**

Now we know how to behave and act!

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