Ephesians 5:15-20
Seize Every Opportunity
1. Because the days are evil
2. By growing in our spiritual understanding

August 23, 2015

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. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (NIV)

A number of years ago, an advertiser attempted to sell its product by using the slogan, "Go for the gusto". The advertiser wanted us to think, "Hey, I'm only going to go around once. Life is short, and it's only getting shorter. Therefore I'd better seize every opportunity I have if I want to make the most of life." The obvious suggestion was that you could just exist in this life by buying some other brand you see or you could really live life to the fullest and buy their brand.

Now you and I know better than to buy into that sort of thinking, right? Because you and I know that while you do go around only once in this life, there is something else—the afterworld. There is heaven, or there is hell, and it lasts forever. And, as we've heard in a couple of our readings for this morning, it is God who will decide where we spend that eternity.

Therefore you and I know that this life is not about accumulating the most toys, having the most pleasure, or going for the most gusto. No, this life is about getting right with God and getting ready for the next life.

And, sinners that we are, we know that there is only one way, one person who can get us right with God—Jesus Christ. We know that he's done just that—not by going for the gusto, not by living it up, but by offering his life as a sacrifice for our sins. And because he has done that, we are right with God.

Knowing that, maybe you and I don't feel particularly compelled to go for the gusto in this life, because we know that we already have something much more important—eternal life in with God in heaven. So maybe we treat this life as sort of a sitting around while waiting for heaven. I’m a stranger here—just passing through, you know.

So it’s a bit surprising to see in our reading this morning that God tells us in our reading this morning to treat the time of this life as vitally important, to “make the most of every opportunity”, to go for the gusto.

In order to understand what would cause God to say that and what it means for us to go for the gusto, we need to look at the context of the words of our text. In the section just prior to our text, Paul has told the Ephesians to live as children of the light so that they may expose the deeds of darkness. The intended result of this is that the sinner may see his need for a Savior and then be brought to faith in Christ, who is the Light of the World. In this section Paul shows that if we are going to effectively expose the deeds of darkness (and then shine the light of the gospel of Christ), we must be wise and not foolish in our own actions and attitudes.
A wise Christian lives their life making the most of every opportunity. And a more accurate translation, a translation which conveys the urgency of the situation even better, is "seizing every opportunity". When I picture that, I picture someone who is alert, watchful, poised to take advantage of any opportunity that may present itself. Therefore when such an opportunity appears, that wise Christian reaches—yes, lunges—out to take hold of that opportunity, even pursues that opportunity.

The unwise Christian, by contrast, kind of glides through life, oblivious to the opportunities surrounding them, making half-hearted attempts to pursue the opportunities. After those opportunities are safely out of reach, they retreat to their own sleepy little world.

Such a Christian does not realize the urgency. Paul says that we ought to seize every opportunity "because the days are evil". Don’t misunderstand. Paul isn’t saying that because the days are evil, there are many opportunities.

There’s a danger in such thinking, because it’s a short logical step from “There’s lots of opportunities” to thinking, “No big deal if I let this opportunity go—after all, there will be another one shortly.”

And soon we end up saying, "There will always be another chance. I'll just let this opportunity go. When Uncle Ted makes a joking reference to joining all his friends in hell, I'll just kind of ignore it. A better opportunity will surely come along. After all, we see each other at family gatherings every summer." Or, "When all the boys at work want to stop at a shady establishment for some “entertainment” on Friday after work, that's hardly a good opportunity to let my light shine. I'll just go along with it for tonight. After all, there will certainly be better opportunities, easier opportunities. And if I'm shown that I'm just like them, they'll be more likely to listen to me when the right opportunity finally comes up!" Or, "My friend said she was feeling guilty about all the foolish things she did in college. It sounded like maybe she was asking for some sort of comfort from me. But I wasn't sure, and I didn't really have the time, so I just laughed and said, 'Hey, a lot of people who do foolish stuff in college turn out to be pretty good adults.' I mean, if she's really feeling guilty, I'm sure it will come up again. There are always more opportunities."

But Paul is not saying that the evil is providing many opportunities. Instead he is saying, "Look at all the evil out there. It is swallowing up the opportunities." Every time someone laughs at the portrayal of God as a kindly old grandfather, powerless to punish his grandchildren, an opportunity has been swallowed up. Every time a nation watches someone on a talk show say, "I have to do whatever is right for me, and no one else has any right to tell me what to do"—and the audience applauds, many opportunities have been swallowed up.

Because the next time someone tries to tell those people about a God who has rules, a God who is to be feared, they will that much less likely to listen. The next time we attempt to talk about our Savior with our co-workers, they're going to be that much less likely to take what we have to say seriously. After all, weren't we sitting right next to them on Friday evening?

And every time an unbeliever dies, not only have opportunities been swallowed up, but so has a soul. You see, "the next time", "a better time" may never come for Uncle Ted, because that may be the last family gathering he attends before his death.

The point is this: You never know if God is giving to you the best opportunity anyone will ever have—or even the last opportunity anyone will ever have—to witness to that person. There is an urgency.
And yet it’s an urgency that we have often failed—miserably—to show. Far too often we have failed to seize the moments, the opportunities to let our light shine. Too often we have stood there, hoping for the moment to quickly pass. Too often we have committed the sin of being “unwise.”

And why have we had such failures? Why have we committed such damnable sins? Because far too often we have failed to heed Paul’s encouragement, “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled by the Spirit.”

Now I’m not suggesting that we spent the past week in a drunken stupor. But if it wasn’t alcohol that filled us during this past week, what was it? Something filled you. Something filled your time, something dominated your thoughts, something controlled your heart, something consumed your soul.

Paul uses drunkenness as merely an example here—he could just as well have used recreation, entertainment, or any of a hundred other things—Paul uses drunkenness as merely an example here of the things take our time, hoard our attention—yes, fill us.

And in doing so, they cause us to keep from being filled with the Spirit. And let’s take note of that word—“filled.” Paul doesn’t merely encourage us here to have a spiritual portion of us, but to be “filled.” That’s an intimidating word, a demanding word, an “all of me” word.

Did that word describe you during the past week? Were you “filled” with the Spirit? Or were you filled instead with a whole host of other things—some of them sinful in and of themselves, and others, while it may not be quite accurate to call them sinful, they could certainly be called “unwise”?

If you were filled with God's Word only one hour this past week and filled with the "wisdom" of the world during the other 167 hours, were you being wise? Were you really striving to "understand what the Lord's will is"?

If you didn't attend a Bible class, if you didn't have family devotions, if you didn't have personal devotions—in other words, if you weren't being filled with the Spirit, it shouldn't be surprising if you also failed to "make the most of every opportunity.” It shouldn't be surprising if some of the evil of these days expressed itself in our lives also. For Satan is constantly working together with our sinful nature—not only to make us live as unwise Christians, but also to make us lose our Christianity entirely. The warning "the days are evil" finally applies to us also.

So what do we do with these failures? What do we do with these times that we have failed to go for the gusto, the times we have failed to seize every opportunity because we had previously failed to fill ourselves with the Spirit? What do we do with our sins?

We confess them, we take them to the foot of the cross, and we leave them there, knowing that Jesus has hurled them into the depths of the sea.

Then, instead of hanging our heads in shame over the past, we can look to the future, asking ourselves, "How can I avoid being foolish? How can I instead be prepared to seize every opportunity? How can I be filled with the Spirit?"

It’s not so complicated as it might appear. To be “filled by the Spirit”, you don’t need to go to some revival at which the preacher makes you fall down on the floor in a trance, you don’t need to try to get yourself to speak in tongues, and you don’t need to continually hope for a burning sensation within you. If we want to be filled by the Spirit, we simply need to do (and help one another do) what Paul says. He says that we are to "speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs."
In other words, speak God’s Word, sing God’s promises, sing God’s mighty deeds, sing God’s great love. Note also that we are to speak this praise to "one another." As brothers and sisters in Christ, we should constantly be encouraging one another and building up the body of Christ.

We encourage one another by coming together to worship. We encourage one another by learning from one another in Bible class. We cause each other to be filled with the Spirit, to be alert, to be poised to seize the opportunities whenever we come together around God’s Word. As we do so, we remind each other why we are doing it—in order to be, in Paul’s words, "giving thanks always"—always, not just in church, but at work, with our friends, and everywhere we go—we do it "to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." And that really wraps it all together for us, doesn't it? It is our love for God and what he has done for us through Jesus that makes us want to seize every opportunity to bring others to faith--first by exposing the deeds of darkness, and then by showing people their Savior. When we think of all that Jesus has done for us and when we think of the comfort and joy that knowledge gives us, we cannot help but want others to have the same knowledge, comfort, and joy that we do. Our love for Jesus causes us to want to seize every opportunity.

So today, this week, always—search for, seek out, and seize every opportunity. Go for the gusto! Amen.