

Living Wisely (Ephesians 5:3-20)

Wisdom involves making choices that help us live good, happy and worthwhile choices. In Ephesians 5:15, Paul urges us to live as wise. In fact, Ephesians 4 and 5 is all about how to live in the light of the fact that God has made us alive in Christ.

Choose life?

Ephesians 5:15 says:

" Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise..." (Ephesians 5:15)

And in the Old Testament book of Proverbs, there is an invitation from Wisdom personified as a woman to come and enjoy her wonderful feast. The invitation ends:

"Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding." (Proverbs 9:6)

Wisdom is choosing the right way to walk or live, ways to live that lead to human flourishing, ways that lead to true life.

This present moment is perhaps a unique moment. Our lives have been shaken up tremendously over the last 18 months by the Pandemic. As we begin to settle into a new normal, where we are protected by vaccines and learning to live with the virus, we need to make some choices about how we live our lives.

During lockdown our lives have changed. As we return to life without lockdown we need to make choices about how much we return to the way of life we had before and how much we make changes as a result of what we have learnt through lockdown.

Now perhaps more than other times we face choices about how we should live.

Paul says, be very careful then how you live - choose wisely!

So, how do we choose life? How do we live wisely? What does it mean to walk in the way of understanding? That is what Ephesians 4 and 5 is all about.

The Big Picture: Life in Christ...

As Christians we need to start with Jesus. After all, Jesus in a way that echoes the invitation of wisdom, in John 6 says:

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. " (John 6:51)

Jesus offers us not just a happier and lasting life now, but eternal life.

And the message of Ephesians is that when we come to Christ, God actually makes us alive:

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions --it is by grace you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:4-5)

To choose to be in Christ is to choose life.

But it is also to choose a new way of life. If you remember back to chapter 2 of the book, there is a before and after. Before we walk or live in the way of death:

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used **to live** when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." (Ephesians 2:1-2)

but after we have been made alive with Christ, we have a new way of life to live out:

"For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of **life**." (Ephesians 2:10, NRSV)

Because God has made us alive in Christ, the way we live our lives is different. That is the thrust of what Paul is saying in chapters 4 and 5. Using the same language of how we should live he says five times something along the lines of:

"God has made you alive in Christ, therefore live this way...."

We see that:

"therefore, ... live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called," (Ephesians 4:1)

"therefore... no longer live as the Gentiles live..." (Ephesians 4:17)

"therefore... live a life of love..." (Ephesians 5:1-2)

"therefore... live as children of light..." (Ephesians 5:7-8)

"therefore... be careful how you live, not as wise, but as unwise..." (Ephesians 5:15)

So, what does this way of life look like? I have three headings to try and draw the themes together:
Live differently, live fruitfully and live gratefully.

Live Differently - vs. 3-8

First of all, then there is a call to live differently from the rest of the world.

We've already seen some of those differences in last week's passage, but perhaps the differences listed in this passage are the more obvious ones, where Christians and non-Christians will differ in their lifestyles.

In verse 3, Paul says there must not be even a hint of:

- sexual immorality or fornication, that is any sex outside of a marriage relationship between a man and a woman.
- greed - living with the aim of accumulating as much wealth as possible

then in verse 18 he warns against:

- drunkenness - by which Paul means getting drunk on alcohol, but we could also take these days as including getting high on other drugs that are now available.

The reason we live differently as Christians is because we are children of light, not darkness. The only reason we are able to live differently is because God has made it possible for us to see.

Being a Christian is a bit like being in a room where everyone is blindfolded, but someone has come and taken your blindfold off. The people who are blindfolded will behave in one way - walking slowly

around, feeling their way. But you can live quite differently, walking around confidently and easily because you can see what is happening.

In verse 8, he tells us that we are different:

"For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light"
(Ephesians 5:8)

And this is a difference that arises out of our desire to love as Jesus loves.

In 5:2 it says:

"and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Ephesians 5:2)

It is then that he goes on in verse 3 to say: there must not be sexual immorality and greed among Christians. In other words Paul is saying that sexual immorality and greed are incompatible with living a life of love.

When it comes to Sexual Immorality this may seem odd. After all the so called, 'summer of love' in 1967 was all about becoming sexually liberated with cries of 'free love' referring to sex being freed from the traditional constraints that had existed in our society as a result of its Christian heritage.

But as Christians we want to live wisely and understand what God's will is and what true love looks like. We don't want to be deceived by empty slogans.

The Bible teaches that sex is a powerful intimate expression of total lifelong commitment. It creates a union with that person.

Within marriage it is loving to express that union sexually, because the commitment has been formally agreed and expressed formally.

Outside of marriage sex becomes at best a distortion of the truth and at worst an outright lie. As such it is damaging and unloving.

Greed is also incompatible with a life of love. Greed is the opposite of generosity, which is an expression of love. You may not be explicitly harming people by aiming to get riches for yourself, but you are certainly not aiming to help them in the kind of sacrificial way that is the mark of a life of love.

So if you are serious about living wisely, living as a child of light and living a life of love - if you have truly been made alive in Christ what changes might you need to make?

- If you are caught up in a lifestyle that involves pornography or sleeping around, then as a Christian, God is calling you to stop from those things. If you struggle to do so, seek help.
- If you are in a relationship that is sexual, but you are not married, then if it is a committed relationship, you need to make that explicit and get married, if you are not sure whether it is a committed relationship, then you need to either end it or agree to stop it being sexual until you become married.

- When it comes to greed then perhaps now is a time to look at your finances and work out how can I be more generous in the days and months ahead.

Live Fruitfully - vs. 9-14

God has made us alive in Christ, therefore live differently. But also live fruitfully.

This is the more positive side of the argument. In verse 9, Paul shows us what living fruitfully looks like:

"(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)" (Ephesians 5:9)

The deeds of darkness, however, such as sexual immorality, greed and drunkenness are described as fruitless (verse 11). They don't achieve anything good or lasting.

How many people have wasted years of their lives on sexual relationships that fall apart and they live to regret?

How many people amass loads of wealth for themselves, but gain no happiness from it and do no good with it? What is more they cannot take it with them when they die?

How many people waste their lives away or even shorten their lives through drink and drug abuse?

These are all the fruitless deeds of darkness.

But, Paul says, that wise living, seeks to make the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

So, how do we make the most of every opportunity? By being light in the darkness.

Living differently is tough, because people notice you. If everyone else is getting drunk and you stay sober, people will notice you. If you don't sleep with your girlfriend or boyfriend, when everybody else does, then people will notice you. If your lifestyle does not seem as extravagant as others on a similar pay grade, because you are being generous with your money, then people will notice you.

And they may be unhappy, because your good living will be a light to expose their selfish living.

But, your light will make a difference. In fact, it says that:

"But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."" (Ephesians 5:13-14)

These verses seem to be obscure, but the point seems to be that when your light exposes the deeds of darkness, then some people will be woken up to their situation, some people will also be made alive with Christ and become children of light too! When you live as a child of light, then the light will bear fruit.

I was once speaking to another vicar, who told me that what led them to become interested in Christianity was that when he went to university he was struck by the Christians being so different. He wondered why they didn't get drunk with the others or sleep with their boyfriends or girlfriends. Their Christian behaviour bore fruit, and he became a Christian!

Live Gratefully - vs. 15-20

God has made us alive in Christ, therefore we live differently, we live fruitfully, but we also live gratefully.

People often look to have a good time, by drinking lots. But, that is not the Christian way. Drinking leads to a loss of control that is certainly fruitless and unwise.

But, Christians are not against joy! Rather we are called to find joy by being filled not with alcohol, but the Spirit and giving God thanks and praise as we gather together.

If God has made us alive in Christ, then how can we not find ways of expressing our gratitude to him for that. And are not expressions of gratitude a root to true and deep joy. What is more if we are made alive in Christ to be the body of Christ, how can we not meet together and encourage one another in praise.

One of the choices some of you are facing is whether or when to return to in person church. If we are real about wise living, as children of light, living a life of love, then that must be a priority.

Admittedly, for some it will be a big step. Perhaps you are not used to large gatherings after the last several months or maybe there are other reasons or excuses putting you off. In fact making the step to come back is a hard and challenging one - especially the first time.

I remember when I moved to London to do my teacher training, I was living in a bedsit by myself and for the first time I had to choose to go to a new church on a Sunday completely by myself. I had always been to church before that and would have counted myself as a keen Christian and someone had recommended a good church near to where I lived.

Yet, I remember being surprised at how hard it was to motivate myself to make that first step to a new church that morning. However, with God's help I did it and God really blessed me over the next five years through that church and the people in it. It was at that church that I made some great friends, I met Fiona and I went forward to train as a vicar. If I hadn't made the effort to join others in singing songs of praise to one another on that first Sunday, then none of those things would have happened.

Most of us are now vaccinated, we can sing together in church and encourage one another afterwards, just as these verses encourage us to do as part of our living out our faith. So let's, pray for God's help to take the difficult step over the next few weeks and come back together with others to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to one another.

Choose Life...

God has made us alive in Christ. He chose us for life. Our role now is to live wisely and choose the ways of life that are consistent with our new life in Christ.