**Caring and Filling: a life well lived**

**~~Introduction~~**

~~I mentioned earlier in the service that a year ago I began working at a software company. Starting work at a large, American tech corporation has been an extremely eye opening experience for me. In the time I’ve been there I’ve learnt a great deal about the workings of large corporations; and all the complexities that brings.~~

~~One particular principal which I see put into practice nearly every day, is what has been called “Parkinson’s law of triviality”. Now, Cyril Parkinson was a historian who proposed his law of triviality in a book in 1957. And the law says that “members of an organisation give disproportionate weight to trivial issues”. That the amount of time and effort put into something is often completely out of line with how important the issue actually is. I saw this just recently as we spent a few days planning the upcoming work. When it came to big design decisions – what technologies to use, how to connect everything together, how we were going to make sure we complied with legal requirements; those discussions were usually short and made by the people who knew the areas. However, when it came to deciding which biscuits we should get, the discussion was endless! A whole committee had to be formed! The biscuit committee now produces regular reports on the biscuit situation. I saw that one of the company offices in central Europe decided to rename their meeting rooms, and was asking for a theme for all the names. They received over 300 suggestions for themes, which of course meant a public vote had to be organised to choose the best one (…and after all that the winning vote was to name all their meeting rooms after Icelandic volcanoes!). This is what goes on in my company - but I get the feeling that it’s not just my company that’s subject to the law of triviality. To investing a great deal of effort into issues which are ultimately pointless. It’s something that we see everywhere.~~

~~And, I think it’s not just big organisations which are subject to this. To spending inordinate time on trivial activities. I wonder if sometimes we can look at how we spend our time and, at least~~ *~~feel like~~*~~, we spend huge amount of time on activities which are ultimately pointless. We ask “how is it that I spend such a huge amount of time on one thing, which really doesn’t last”? I wonder if we look at our lives and ask…am I wasting it?~~

~~But the world around us is so non-stop, isn’t it? Things are always progressing; things are always changing. We busy ourselves with jobs, travel, admin, relaxing; and then we ask ourselves where did the time go? All the things I wanted to achieve, all the things I wanted to invest time in. Wouldn’t it be so useful if I could wake up tomorrow and do today all over again – but with all the knowledge I gained today! Then, like Phil in the 1993 film “groundhog day” I could learn another language, learn to play the piano, learn how to do ice sculpture. Then I could spend the time I want with the people I love. I could do something of real value. Something that lasts.~~

~~In Lewis Carroll’s “Through the looking glass” Alice is once again in wonderland, where she meets the Red queen. Listen to this extract~~

*~~“Just at this moment, somehow or other, they began to run. …The most curious part of the thing was, that the trees and the other things round them never changed their places at all: however fast they went, they never seemed to pass anything.~~*

*~~‘Are we nearly there?’ Alice managed to pant out at last.~~*

*~~‘Nearly there!’ the Queen repeated. ‘Why, we passed it ten minutes ago! Faster!’ And they ran on for a time in silence, with the wind whistling in Alice’s ears, and almost blowing her hair off her head, she fancied, till suddenly, just as Alice was getting quite exhausted, they stopped, and she found herself sitting on the ground, breathless and giddy. The Queen propped her up against a tree, and said kindly, ‘You may rest a little now.’~~*

*~~Alice looked round her in great surprise. ‘Why, I do believe we’ve been under this tree the whole time! Everything’s just as it was!’~~*

*~~‘Of course it is,’ said the Queen, ‘what would you have it?’~~*

*~~‘Well, in our country,’ said Alice, still panting a little, ‘you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.’~~*

*~~‘A slow sort of country!’ said the Queen. ‘Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!’”~~*

~~Doesn’t that express how we feel sometimes? That we are always running. We~~ *~~must~~* ~~keep going. And yet we never seem to get anywhere. Our running seems pointless – we just stay in the same place. We’re busy people, busy all the time, but nothing ever seems to be done. We desire for things which are meaningful, which will last. But we get carried away choosing biscuits and naming meeting rooms. We must sit in traffic; we binge watch series on Netflix. We have to fill in time sheets and do the washing up. We long for things which last, but feel as if so much time is wasted.~~

***~~“A life lived carefully”~~***

~~The first verse of our passage todays hits on this feeling really quite powerfully. “Be very careful then, how you live”. There’s a way in which this verse does validate our feelings of a wasted life. “Be very careful then, how you live”. Be very careful then, not to waste your life!~~

In our 21st century hurriedness, we can so often move on from one thing to another without ever stopping to give the proper care and attention to what we are doing. And yet we do know that there are certain things which are absolutely worth taking our time over. In my workplace they’re calling the month of August “mindfulness month”, as they’re trying to encourage everyone to take a minute out of their busyness and their hectic lives to stop and take proper care over themselves and their work. We see the value of taking time over things which we see as important – our health (mental and physical), the real parts of our jobs, education, homes and families. The areas which we consider most important are the areas that we do desire to spend the most time on. Turning this around, a useful question when it comes to self-inspection is “what areas do I take my time over?” That illustrates for us what we value.

But here in this section of the book Ephesians, Paul’s focus is specifically on the Christian life. His call is to take the proper time, give the proper care to the state of your walk with Christ. ~~From the middle of chapter 4, right through almost to the end of this letter to the Ephesians he’s been comparing the person who has been transformed by Christ to who they were before – throwing off lying and putting on truth, anger vs peace, thieving vs generosity, gossip vs encouragement, revenge vs forgiveness, sexual immorality vs self-control. Here in these verses we’re looking at now he reaches his climax as he calls all of us, all of us in our busy and non-stop lives, to stop. To take the right time and care over the things that matter, and to take that care supremely in our Christian lives as we live out the truths of Christ’s saving work and strive to be more and more like Him in every way we can.~~

*“Wisdom and Opportunity”*

~~And the call here is to be wise~~ ***~~[read v17]~~***~~. Wisdom is a theme throughout the bible, and something that that God’s word has much to say about. A whole section of the old testament is called the “wisdom literature”, and in the new testament we have Jesus’ teaching, and the book of James, which might also be called wisdom literature. And of course these aren’t the only places we can find wisdom – throughout the bible there are great lessons to be learnt, and we have much to gain from godly men and woman throughout history and in our churches around us.~~

~~The question is, what does Paul mean by wisdom here? When he says “not as unwise but as wise”, is he saying “not~~ *~~without~~* ~~considering and applying in every situation the teachings of psalms, proverbs, James, all the rest of the bible, all of church history and the godly people of your church….but~~ *~~with~~* ~~all these things”. Well of course, in a way, he is; because wisdom is not just about knowing the right catchy saying for the right moment, but something to be practiced and lived out so that we are transformed into people who make the ‘wise’ choice instinctively.~~

~~But in this passage, when Paul talks about wisdom, he does have something in particular in mind. In v17 he says~~ ***~~[read v17]~~***~~. Being foolish, which is the other side of being wise, is contrasted with “understanding what the Lord’s will is”. To live as wise and not as unwise, to be wise and not foolish, is to “understand what the Lord’s will is”.~~

~~And now if we flick back to chapter 1 of Ephesians, vs 7-9, it says “In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us.~~ *~~With all wisdom and understanding,~~**~~[God the Father] made known to us the mystery of his will~~*~~.” The be wise is to “understand what the Lord’s will is”, and chapter 1 tells us God has made known his will in Jesus Christ – it was to provide “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins”. It was God’s intention that believers should understand his saving plan, and so he lavished his grace on us in all “wisdom and understanding”. The wisdom and understanding to know his saving plan!~~

~~“Be very careful then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise”. Not as those who don’t know God’s will, but as those who do. Not as those who don’t know of the redemption, reconciliation, resolution which was won with Christ’s blood on the Christ~~*~~, but as those who do~~*~~. Paul’s call is to live our Christian lives in light of the truths of what Christ has done!~~ *~~That~~* ~~is to live a life of wisdom!~~

And ~~so we make the most of every opportunity. We don’t let a moment be wasted. We don’t give a moment over to sin, but neither do we give time over to empty activity, procrastination, wasting time. We resolve with Jonathan Edwards “~~*~~never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can~~*~~.” Neither do we rush through the things which are important, but pause in the midst of our busyness to pay the proper attention to that which deserves it. As we go about our days, we commit to avoiding unhelpful practices and giving full attention to those which honour our heavenly father. To our family. To our work. To relaxing well. We put our best effort into enjoying good things. And we put our best efforts into our Christian lives.~~

I was challenged this week as I wrote this regarding making the most of every opportunity in prayer. It’s not a lack of material to pray for that leads me not to pray. It’s not a lack of opportunity even – yes I have to get ready for work in the morning, and I’m tired when I get home from work and I just want to relax, and there are so many other responsibilities to attend to. But can I really not carve out 5 minutes, 10 minutes, half an hour? Of course I can. I know I can make time. It can be hard, it requires discipline, but we do the wise thing. Which is to look to Christ. And when we look to Christ, when we begin to understand the Lord’s will, when we consider the “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, … the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us”, it becomes so clear that this is the way of the wise, to make the most of the opportunities which are there to converse with the creator and sustained of the universe who was willing to die for me but rose from the dead to overcome death itself. When we look to God, when we understand his will in Christ, we are transformed into people who or no longer foolish and unwise, but very careful how we live, making the most of every opportunity.

~~And we have a little warning in these verses, to bring home what he’s saying~~ ***~~[read v15-17, emphasise “days are evil”]~~***~~. The reason for taking full advantage of every occasions is that “the days are evil”. Paul repeatedly refers to the time in which we live as “the present evil age”, as it is characterised by rulers and demonic powers which are doomed to pass away; but are opposed to God and his purposes. The Ephesian Christians, and those of us now who believe, have already participated in the world to come, the powers of the new age have broken in upon us, and we are throwing off the old self and putting on the new; but we continue to live in the midst of these evil days as we await the final redemption. We don’t withdraw from the world. We don’t fear it. But we live wisely, as those who understand the Lord’s will, taking advantage of every opportunity in this fallen world to conduct ourselves in a manner that is pleasing to God.~~

***“A life filled by the spirit”***

~~At his point Paul could immediately begin to list useful practices for wise living. For how to be very careful, how to live wisely, how to make the most of every opportunity - how to live your best life. He could immediately talk about gathered worship, singing and thanksgiving. Living peacefully. He could talk about bible reading and prayer, mindfulness and meditation, and so many other things which may enrich the Christian life. But before Paul gets to these things, before he begins to unpack some of the characteristics of the Christian life, before we consider what wise living look like, he sets up an important contrast. Verse 18 -~~ ***~~[read v18]~~***~~. It’s quite striking isn’t it?~~

~~From this text alone, we can say that it is never, ever, the Lord’s will for someone to be drunk. Excessive drinking leads to debauchery, which degrades the drinker and others around them. People get drunk for all kinds of reasons – to ease the monotony of life, to escape who they are, to escape situations, to ease the pressure of something. And the effects of drunkenness on people can be varied. Some people are belligerent, some affectionate, some weepy. Some shout, others sing. Some are utterly unpredictable. In the context of making the most of every moment, of being aware of evil days, the great tragedy is that drunkenness immerses someone in the evil flow of the days and makes life a series of missed opportunities. It becomes a tragic waste.~~

~~For some there is a very practical challenge that needs to be heard here. But maybe for you excessive drinking is not a temptation you face. Still, stop and think for a moment if the characteristics of drunkenness are present in any of the activities you regularly engage in? Not necessarily the physiological, biological, effects; but the change of personality. Activities whose primary purpose is escaping self. Activities which may cause loss of control and missed opportunities. There are more opportunities for self-inspection here.~~

But while we can draw out the reasons to avoid drunkenness here and be engaged here, Paul’s command “do not get drunk on wine” serves the purpose of setting up the following clause. ***[read v18]***. Paul is setting us up to contrast drunkenness with the filling with the spirit of God. He’s used example of drunkenness to set up the command which follows – “be filled with the spirit”!

When someone is drunk we talk about them being “under the influence” – under the influence of alcohol. When someone is filled with the spirit, with God’s sprit, that person is under the influence of the spirit. But that’s really as far as the similarities go, because as soon as we get into what it looks like to be under the influence of each of these, we get to an endless list of differences. ~~Here’s what pastor and medical doctor Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote about this passage.~~

~~“~~*~~Alcohol is not a stimulant – it is a depressant. It depresses first and foremost the highest centres of all in the brain. They control everything that gives a man self-control, wisdom, understanding, discrimination, judgement, balance, the power to assess everything; in other words, everything that makes a man behave at his very best and highest. What the Holy spirit does, however is the exact opposite. He really does stimulate. He stimulates our every faculty, the mind and the intellect, the heart, and the will”.~~*

~~People turn to drunkenness to escape, to be numbed, to experience a temporary buzz. Alcohol causes people to lose their inhibitions, to lose self-control; it numbs the highest and most beautiful attributes of humans. The holy spirit though? The fruit of the spirit are love (that highest of all human relationships), joy (lasting fulfilment and happiness), peace (tranquillity and rest in our hearts), forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-control. This is filling with the spirit; this is the truth for every Christian!~~

~~Alcohol degrades. The Holy Spirit elevates. And it is in this elevation of a soul, when you are filled with the sprit, that you buy up the time, the opportunities in an evil day. Before Paul moves on to the practical examples of the Christian life, things that characterise wise living, he wants us to see that what comes first is the filling of the Holy Spirit. It is the work of God in our hearts. Our heavenly father has not left his children alone to live for him, to make the most of their lives; to do the best they can with techniques and routines. No, he has sent his spirit and commands all believers to be filled, to allow that spirit to change them more and more into the image of God and Christ. There is a strong enphasis on God’s activity in this transforming work; but it is not done apart from personal involvement in imitating Christ, wlaking in love after the pattern of Christ’s love. Although we do not fill ourselves, we are to be receptive to the Spirit’s transforming work, making us into the likeness of God and Christ – so that we may walk wisely.~~

And so it’s at this point, knowing these truths, that we come to look at some of the characteristics of the wise life, at what it looks like, aided by the spirit, to live in light of the truths of what Christ has achieved for us. Let’s read the rest of the passage – starting at v18. ***[read v18-21]***.

Four things: speaking, singing, thanking and submitting. Four things which the Bible picks out as key in the Christian life. Speaking to one another, singing and making music, giving thanks to God, and submitting to one another.

*Speaking*

First: “speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the spirit.” The Christian life is not something we live out individually. No, God is building for himself a church. Just in the previous chapter of Ephesians Paul wrote ***[read 4:11-13]***. God is not in the business of winning individuals, but of building a body. The body of Christ. A body of all believers, each with their role. And one way we join in that is by gathering – as we are here this evening – to speak to one another with Psalms, hymns, and songs from the spirit. Yes, we gather to worship our God, to receive teaching and instruction from the pastors and teachers; but also to build up and encourage one another. That is one of the reasons why we raise our voices as one in songs – we are speaking those words to one another, even as we direct our worship to God. That is why we opened the service today by speaking the words of Psalm 95. Look at the opening words of the Psalm – ***[read Psalm 95:1-2].*** This Psalm has been given to the church - to the body of Christ, to us - *to be used to encourage and build one another up*. And this doesn’t stop with our formal Sunday times. This purpose is why we have tea and coffee after the service, why we meet with one another during the week. To speak psalms, hymns and songs from the spirit to one another.

*Singing*

But course the music doesn’t stop there, because alongside the speaking to one another, we have the personal, vertical dimension as we are instructed to “sing and make music from your heart to the Lord”. There is a music also from the heart. Much of that is itself silent, and even if expressed out loud the focus is not on the melody and musicality. (thankfully for some…). But this is a sincere music, informed and motivated by the truths revealed in God’s word, flowing forth from our hearts. There’s an old hymn that says

*“My life flows on in endless song;  
above earth’s lamentation,  
I hear the sweet, though far off hymn  
that hails a new creation.*

*No storm can shake my inmost calm  
while to that Rock I’m clinging.  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,  
how can I keep from singing?”*

This hymn expresses the pattern of knowing and understanding the truths of what Christ has achieved for us being lived out as a song of praise. When looking at what Christ has achieved, how can our hearts be kept from singing?

So two characteristics of the Christian life - of the filling of the spirit, of wise living - are the speaking of psalms, song and hymns to one another, and the singing of songs to God from the heart.

*Thanking*

The third listed here is “*always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”.* The opposite of thankfulness, grumbling and ingratitude, was something which characterised the old testament people of God, the Israelites – and against which the Lord spoke directly. After God has miraculously and dramatically freed the Israelites people from slavery in Egypt, as he is sending manna from heaven to sustain them as they travel the desert the Israelites start murmuring and complaining about what they do not have. In Numbers chapter 11 verse 5 they say *“We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!’”*. The Israelites show no gratitude to God for their freedom after 400 years of slavery. For his non-stop goodness in providing food miraculously each morning. Instead they complain that they no longer have cucumbers!

We laugh, but in our busyness we can so easily be inclined to grumbling and complaining as we are focussed on the next task which needs to be done, as we focus in on the never ending list of tasks which need to be done. We open our phones and see all the things we do not have. We see relationships and families around us and say “why can’t I have that”? We walk through the Grafton centre outside and see adverts for holidays, clothes, gadgets which we are convinced would enrich our lives; but instead we must make do with what we have. We long for cucumbers, when our God has already prepared a mighty feast for us. When he is already saying to us ***[read Isaiah 55:1-2]***.

No. The grumbling spirit is not compatible with the Holy Spirit. We must come back, time and time again, to the redemption we have through Christ’s blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. Understanding of this will drive us to wise living; and particularly to thankfulness.

The particular call to thankfulness we have here in this passage is to the extreme. We are to give thanks constantly, and for everything. And so what is being spoken about here is more than a voiced prayer of thanksgiving or a conscious feeling of gratitude (although it certainly will include that). This regularity and universality is a command for God’s people, both corporately and individually, to have a thankful attitude of mind and heart which comes to expression regularly in thanksgiving and praise. Gratitude to God, which permeates the whole being of this being, will be obvious as their entire life expresses their praise to him constantly.

*Submitting*

What a beautiful thing a thankful heart is. And finally, believers whose lives have been filled by God’s spirit will be marked by submission.

In the past month I’ve had the joy of going to two Christian weddings of good friends, and at both of those weddings, the reading during the ceremony started with this verse – v21 of Ephesians 5 – and went on to the following verses looking at submission and leading within marriage. But more rightly this verse belongs with the passage we are looking at now – as part of exploring the filling of the holy spirit, as part of living wisely. It will be important to keep that in mind as a wide and general principle as in future weeks you look at the divinely ordered relationships in the rest of this chapter of Ephesians.

But this is something for all believers. Believers who follow the supreme model for submission in the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God who in an electrifying moment became incarnate in the flesh. Who washed the feet of his disrespectful, glory seeking, status-ladder climbing disciples – and then gave the command in John 13 ‘go and do likewise’. Christ Jesus himself, who “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; rather, he made himself nothing, becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!”

We are to display the meekness and gentleness of Christ. We are to consider others better than ourselves. And this out of reverence for Christ. The one to whom the entire church submits, and the one whose glory and truths we are demonstrating in practicing submission with one another.

**Conclusion**

Each of the 4 things is strikingly beautiful in itself. Mutual building, music in the heart, a thankful heart, and a submissive heart. We see the value of these things. We see they are something worth investing effort into. But wonderfully, when they come together in a single heart they form something absolutely sublime and compelling. These things, in the life of a believer, filled with the spirit in a busy, decaying world give a perspective and attitude unlike anything else. It buys back the time. It makes the most of every opportunity. It lives as wise and not as unwise. It orders its priorities. It gives time to the eternal. It is the life of the believer who knows and understands the redemption in Christ’s blood.

Look to the truths of Christ, and live it out! Look to what was won for you at the cross which has been revealed for us. Place your faith in Christ, be filled with the spirit, and live it out in speaking, singing, thanking and submitting. For the first time or the five hundredth. Place your faith in Christ, and live it out. Let’s not waste our lives, but truly make the most of every opportunity.

Let’s pray now.