

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 19, 2018
Ephesians 5:6-21
“Redeeming the Time”

Seems like Paul is giving good advice in our epistle lesson for today. Walk with care—not like a fool but like one who is wise. Redeem the time—make the most of it, because the days are evil. And certainly, it only makes sense to understand what the will of the Lord is.

Of course, that’s all pretty general. It would be helpful if St. Paul got a bit more specific. Which he does: “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). Now we’re getting somewhere.

But be careful where you get to. I can imagine someone using this as proof-positive that all alcohol consumption is a sin, and that the wise one is he who is just filled to bursting with energy and enthusiasm. So let us use these instructions to speak of drunkenness and debauchery, and of being filled with the Spirit; for herein lies Law and Gospel.

When Paul warns of drunkenness here, he does not do so to prohibit wine; rather, he warns against the reckless living that goes hand in hand with the abuse of alcohol, or other substances, for that matter.

What I mean is this: it’s my understanding that drunkenness was a common temptation in New Testament times for one of two reasons. On the one hand, there was the wealthy jet-set with too much time on their hands who did nothing better with their lives than indulge in whatever they wanted to. Thus, you probably had your fair share of wealthy soirees where people had way too much to drink and did some pretty awful things before they sobered up.

However, there wasn’t all that much of an upper class back then, and there was a far more common cause of drunkenness: it was hopelessness. Picture a world of dirt floors and no antibiotics to fight off childhood diseases, where mortality rates were terribly high and your job prospects horribly low. No choices, no freedoms to speak of. That was life in the ancient world. It was a common belief among people in society that life was simply a burden that one had to endure. When one has no hope and little respect for life, there’s not much reason to live carefully, now, is there? When Christians came along proclaiming hope—and everlasting hope to boot, it was a startling message.

So Paul was targeting far more than a few too many drinks and dancing with a lampshade on your head. He was warning against self-serving gluttony on the one hand and hopelessness on the other. Both deny the Savior—gluttony by self-worship and hopelessness by despair. Either way is reckless living, because either way is a living death that leads to judgment.

It’s easy to preach this, then: don’t abuse substances and live a wild life, because there will be a price to pay. I can preach that, but if you need to hear that sermon, you’ll get a very effective

version from a Libby Police officer. Furthermore, don't despair because you are the Lord's. I'm not sure, though, that that is a necessary sermon. I mean, as far as I know, y'all aren't getting together for wild parties every Friday night. Nor are you without hope that comes with faith, for you are here and you confess the Christian faith.

Well, let's try this on for size: you hear in the text today that you are to understand what the will of God is. Not just hear in one ear and out the other. Not just repeat back verbatim. But understand, comprehend, and have insight into the will of God. There's a law that accuses. You see, if you take a survey and ask people what sin most damages our society today, I'm betting the majority will say lust, since immorality is everywhere. Maybe materialism, with the prosperity we enjoy. I would propose to you that a very dangerous and pervasive sin is sloth. Not physical sloth, mind you, since it seems so many are always on the go and have too much to do. Rather, it's a mental sloth, a lack of willpower to consider serious matters.

Distractions and entertainments are all around. It's far easier to watch television than to read a serious book, because reading requires thinking and thinking requires work. It's easier to pick up an X-Box controller and test your reactions than it is to meditate upon God's Word. It's far easier to listen to talk-radio blather than it is to spend time in prayer. When such entertainments occupy our senses, we begin to believe that these are the things we should be thinking about. That's when lust attacks and carnality becomes the topic of conversation. That's when materialism sets in. That's when we expect the sermon to be a short stand-up routine or nice story, rather than a proclamation of the doctrines of God. That's when we think that sports are worth idolizing, because we don't think there's anything better to be thinking about. That's when we expect God to work according to our thoughts, because we haven't filled our minds with His.

But is that not reckless living? It leaves you unprepared for trials and easy prey for temptation. You can thus live recklessly but believe it's the status quo, without ever getting near a glass of wine.

Now, let's be clear. This isn't a sermon against fun. I watch TV and listen to the radio. But when such distractions become the focus of one's thoughts, there's a problem.

So, here's the Law. Who here has studied God's Word to the point where they understand God's will enough? No one. We all have a way to go before we can be considered wise. Therefore, we move on to hear this instruction in our text: "Be filled with the Spirit."

Be filled with the Spirit, says the Lord through St. Paul; but what does this mean? I would venture that for many Christians, it means a lifestyle. In other words, you're filled with the Spirit when you're a Christian who lives a life that avoids both the sinful partying of the world and the quiet desperation that haunts so many. That leaves you relatively happy, and some would say that emotional wellbeing is being filled with the Spirit. Is it not common to describe a pleasing, emotional experience as a "spiritual" experience? Isn't it common to think of spirituality as how one feels about God?

This however is not what the Lord means. Instead, He means quite literally to be filled with the Holy Spirit. And how is this done? By going to where the Holy Spirit is found...and where is the Holy Spirit at work? The Holy Spirit is at work to give you the forgiveness of sins; therefore, the Holy Spirit is to be found in our Lord's means of grace—His Word and Sacraments. By these means, the Holy Spirit is at work to strengthen your faith and preserve you to life everlasting. Further by the Word of God, the Spirit helps you grow in the knowledge of God and His will. And where the doctrines of God are set to music, there the Spirit is, too: in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, in the singing of God's people and the melody of their hearts. The Spirit is not there because it's your favorite tune or it makes you feel good, but because the text proclaims the work of God.

To be filled with the Spirit, then, is to hear God's Word and receive His Supper. To be filled with the Spirit is to be filled with the forgiveness that is won by Christ.

So with that in mind, we say this: Perhaps you're dogged by reckless living, by focusing too much upon the pleasures of this world so that the gifts of God become idols to replace Him. Perhaps you're mired in some sin of substance abuse or lust or greed or a variety of sins that this world praises. Perhaps you've simply spent the bulk of your time not learning God's doctrine or meditating upon His Word, resenting it as too much of a hassle. By the grace of God, repent. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. Christ Jesus did not forsake His Father's will for the pleasures of this world; His incarnation was not a selfish joyride, but a mission for you. He has gone to the cross and died for your sins so that you might be set free from them. Today, in His Word of Absolution, He declares that you are forgiven. Today, by His Spirit, He increases in you true knowledge of Himself, and true obedience to His Word. You are not lost in a reckless world and evil days; the Lord has redeemed you.

Perhaps you struggle with hopelessness. Despondency and depression are quite common—sometimes because something terrible happens, sometimes because people sample life's pleasures and come away disappointed and believe there's nothing more. There is. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. Rather than leave you in the morass of quiet desperation that knows this is a dying world but tries to enjoy the ride, Christ Jesus has already died in your stead and risen again. Today, by His Word, He declares that you have hope in His name—everlasting hope. In His Supper, He feeds you His body and blood unto life...everlasting life.

“See that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15). This is your wisdom that the world cannot know: your time is redeemed because Christ has redeemed you. Until He delivers you from this world, He sends forth His Holy Spirit to bring you grace and strengthen your faith. Be filled with the Holy Spirit: and if you are filled with the Holy Spirit, you are wise indeed...because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen