

Making the Most of the Time

Ephesians 5:15-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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A few weeks ago, I was in Vancouver for a course. I was still fighting a bacterial infection that I picked up on holidays and that had kind of flared up on the first few days of the course.

After a few days, I found myself rather unhappily making my way to the airport to catch an early flight home.

I was standing on the train kind of sulking at my misfortune and being generally irritated at my underperforming health, when I noticed a young man on the train beside me.

He was doing a very odd thing. He was reading a book.

I'm joking, but only a little. Who reads books anymore? Almost everyone else on the train was either staring at their phones or talking (loudly and obliviously) into phones held face up in front of their mouths on speaker mode as seems to be the new bewildering norm.

But in the middle of all the phones, this young man sat, peacefully reading his book, like some kind of peculiar relic from a bygone age.

I glanced at the cover of the book. *The Art of Living* by Epictetus.

Well. Not just any old book—which would have been remarkable enough—but a book of ancient philosophy and virtue? My mind was well and truly blown. I wanted to lean over and congratulate him or give him a hug or something.

How many in our culture (or even in our churches!) believe that there might be an art to living well in the world? That how we choose to live our lives is something worth thinking deeply about? That there are better and worse ways to spend our days? That something might be required of us and that that something might originate outside of ourselves?

And even for those of us who are thus convinced, how easy is it to just allow the grim tides of consumerism and entertainment and apathy and technology and individualism to wash over us?

As I watched the young man reading Epictetus get off the train, I looked out the window and wondered, “Are we living well? Any of us?”

Ephesians 5:15-16: *Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.*

Paul would agree with Epictetus, there is indeed an art to living. Wisdom is discerning what this looks like.

Epictetus was a Stoic. According to Stoicism, in a world where there is much that is beyond our control, where terrible and beautiful things are always happening, where we are blown around by the winds of time and chance, we should strive to accept whatever befalls us calmly and dispassionately.

A wise person, an “artful liver” should not be yanked around by circumstances good or bad but should have a kind of cool mastery over one’s responses.

This is how we still use the word today. If we hear someone say “their face was stoic in the face of bad news” we are saying that they were tough to read, that you wouldn’t have been able to tell anything had happened.

Stoicism was and remains a view of the world that emphasizes rigorous discipline, self-awareness, and control.

Paul would have been well aware of Stoicism. Indeed, his life would have briefly overlapped with Epictetus (Paul’s life would have been an older man when Epictetus was a child).

As a Pharisee, before his conversion to Christianity, he would likely have been aware of Stoic teachers. After his conversion, he works Stoic ideas into how he dialogues with Gentiles.

For example, in his famous Mars Hill speech in Athens he speaks to those who have statues to “unknown gods.” He commends them for their religiosity but wants to point them to the one true God, “the one in whom we live and move and have our being.” At the end of this speech, Paul says, “as your own poets have said, ‘we are his offspring’” (Acts 17:27-28).

Here Paul is directly quoting the words of the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes’ in his Hymn to Zeus.

But even though Paul certainly borrowed some aspects of Stoicism (not least the importance of self-discipline—think about his comments about drunkenness and debauchery, which are obviously profoundly unwise ways of living), for him wisdom could not be separated from the will and purposes of the God most fully and finally revealed in Jesus Christ.

The question for Paul, in our passage from Ephesians and in many of his other letters is a simple one: What does it look like to live wisely in response to how God has made himself known in Jesus Christ, here and now.

I want to spend the rest of my sermon reflecting on that question. The question of what it means to live not as unwise people but as wise. The question of what it means to make the most of the time, in our particular time, and in the face of our particular evils.

The evils of Paul’s time are outlined in the verses that precede our reading in Ephesians 5.

- Greed (which Paul says interestingly and I think entirely correctly, is a form of idolatry)
- Fornication (sexual activity outside of marriage)
- Impurity
- Obscene, silly and vulgar talk

All these Paul calls “unfruitful works of darkness.” And, of course, these all persist in our time.

Indeed, they not only persist, but are celebrated and dressed up as liberation. I don’t know if our culture is any *more* greedy, sexually confused, impure, obscene, silly or vulgar than

Paul's, but it's certainly broadcast in more lurid and omnipresent detail thanks to the internet.

So, in Paul's time and our own, those who wish to live wisely should always be striving to discipline ourselves and to avoid these things.

But as I alluded to last week, just itemizing a moral checklist rarely has the effect of changing the human heart or modifying human behaviour.

Stoicism is an admirable philosophy, but it perhaps doesn't make quite enough of human weakness, frailty, and sinfulness. It assumes we can just knuckle down and do better. And, sadly, this is not always true.

Sometimes, thanks be to God, we can just roll up our sleeves and do better. We can and we do make changes in our lives.

But to be human, as I probably say in some form or another every week, is to fall short of what we were created for.

So, given who we are, given our stubborn human nature, and given where and when we live in God's story, how do we make the most of the time? How do we live wisely?

I want to suggest four broad areas in which I think Christians can (and must) seek to live wisely in our particular time and place.

To live wisely is to be people of humility in a culture that (inconsistently) demands perfection

Perhaps ironically, given that many people in our time claim to have left religion with all its overbearing, stifling, outdated moral demands behind, we live in quite morally puritanical times.

The nature of the moral norms have certainly shifted. Now, most are centred around identity (race, sexuality, gender) and a very particular form of social justice politics.

Every day, the left and the right go to war over these ideas. Both sides are equally convinced that they are right. Both sides seek to shout down, cancel, shame, and legislate the other side and their views out of existence.

What they share is an unshakeable conviction that they are right, and their enemies are wrong. There is no ambiguity, no nuance, no, “but what about this?” or “have you considered the consequences of that?”

And for those who transgress the One Correct View on any trending issue, punishment is swift and merciless.

Christians can (and must) embody a more honest and humble view of what it means to be a human being.

We do not see everything. We cannot know everything. We all have blind spots. We all tend to interpret things in ways that flatter ourselves. We all fall short of our ideals. We will all find ourselves in need of the grace and mercy of our fellow human beings.

We are not God. To live wisely is to recognize this.

To live wisely is to embrace patience and slowness in a culture of immediacy.

In our hyper-online world, we have been and are being conditioned to expect everything to be available all the time.

We buy things online and expect them to show up a day later on our front porch. Fast food should appear in the time it takes to drive a few meters through a drive-thru. All the music we could ever imagine should be available at our fingertips on Spotify.

Libraries of information should be a click away. Fifteen different streaming services should serve up an endless smorgasbord of tv and movie options. Strawberries should be on our shelves in the dead of February winter. Illnesses (physical or mental) should disappear with a pill or two.

If there were two words that might sum up our expectation of life in the twenty-first century world it might be these: on demand.

I like convenience. But I worry that we are becoming the kinds of creatures who assume that reality should always and immediately respond to our desires.

Perhaps to live wisely in our time and place might be to slow down. To live lives that do not see ourselves and our relentless demands as the center of it all.

To go for more walks. To read books. To cook more meals. To unplug for a few hours (or days). To discipline our desires and appetites. To accept the limitations of our creatureliness.

To not view every technological advancement as a sign of progress. To ask important questions about what is lost with each gain.

There's a lot more that could (and should) be said about that, but I need to move on.

To live wisely is to be people of joy and gratitude in a culture of despair

Paul tells the church in Ephesus to sing songs, to make melodies to the Lord (which we do in worship each week), to give thanks in the name of Jesus Christ.

How desperately we need joyful people in our culture of despair.

It's ironic, isn't it? Given what I have just said about how we have never had more stuff available to us on demand, it doesn't seem to be making us any happier.

Decadent, western cultures are among the most depressed, addicted, and anxious places on the planet. There is a connection here that we should probably pay attention to.

This week, my morning prayers each day included Mary's Magnificat. I paused several times on the following line:

He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty

I doubt Mary was thinking about emptiness in existential or emotional or spiritual terms, but I did.

I wonder if the emptiness that characterizes so much of the West these days is connected to our wealth. We don't think we need God. And we are sent away empty.

The poet and scholar Christian Wiman once said these words in an article I came across in the *New York Times*. He was talking about how movies and novels and storytelling in general in our time often drift toward bleak themes in pursuit of "authenticity." Near the end of the article, he said these words:

Praise, too, is part of any whole artistic and existential vision. Joy is one kind of courage.

I love that quote, and I return to it often. Joy is indeed a kind of courage. And it is a witness to the goodness of God.

To live wisely is to live joyfully, not in a kind of head-in-the-sand, pretend-things-are-better-than-they-are kind of way, but as a celebration of all that is good, and a deep conviction that joy will be the final word God writes in the story.

To live wisely is to be people of faith in a culture of idolatry.

Ours is a time that assumes that the subjective individual self stands at the centre of political, moral, even theological reflection.

This must be consistently and persistently named for what it is. A lie. And a form of dangerous idolatry.

It is a lie that goes back to the original lie in Genesis 3, that we can be our own little gods rather than living within the gracious boundaries within which God created us to flourish.

To live wisely is to recognize that there is a goodness, a truth, and a beauty, and a vision of justice for the world that we did not create, that we do not get to invent, that we are not ultimately responsible for. Our lives are lived in response to God.

To live wisely, again, is to always remember that God is God and that we are not.

So, these are four areas where I look around at the world that we live in, the world in which we are seeking to live out authentically Christian lives, and I see a need for wisdom.

They are not the only four. There are other things that I could have said, that you might think I *should* have said.

The conversation about what it means to live wisely in our time is a conversation that can and should continue.

Our world is in need of artful livers. Of people who reflect carefully on the time in which God has placed us and ask the question, “What is God asking of us here and now? How do we live wisely?”

I want to close with another prayer that I came across this week. To me, this is a prayer for wisdom. It is a prayer that we might be those who make the most of the time in which God has placed us.

This is the collect from Book of Common Prayer that I read on Wednesday:

Eternal God,
the light of minds that know you,
the joy of hearts that love you,
and the strength of wills that serve you:
grant us so to know you that we may truly love you,
and so to love you that we may fully serve you,
whom to serve is perfect freedom,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

