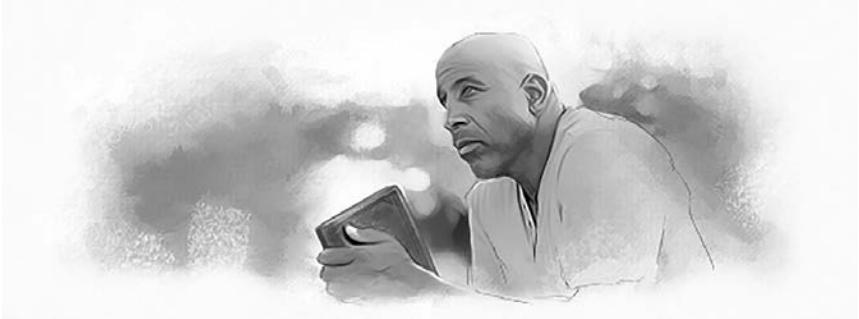


Living Wisely



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 5:1–20, 1 Cor. 5:1–11, Rev. 16:1–16, Col. 4:5, Prov. 20:1, Prov. 23:29–35, Acts 16:25.*

Memory Text: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Ephesians 5:15–17, ESV*).

Not long ago a crystal jug was placed on auction in the United Kingdom. The auctioneers described it as a “nineteenth-century French, claret jug,” estimating its worth at US\$200. Two perceptive bidders recognized the jug as an extremely rare, Islamic ewer. Its true, appraised worth? £5 million (about US\$6.5 million). What allowed that bidder to walk away with such a bargain? The bidder knew something that the auctioneer did not: the true value of the jug.

In Ephesians 5:1–20, Paul contrasts what pagans and believers valued. Pagans valued a racy story (*Eph. 5:4*), a drunken party (*Eph. 5:18*), and debauched sex (*Eph. 5:3, 5*) as the great treasures of life. Believers, though, know an ultimate day of appraisal is coming, when the true value of all things will become apparent (*Eph. 5:5, 6*). Instead of placing their bid on partying and drunkenness, they treasure, among other things, “all that is good and right and true” (*Eph. 5:9, ESV*) in Christ. Paul, thus, urges them to snap up the bargains found in Christ as they live (as we all do) on the threshold of eternity (*Eph. 5:15–17*).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 26.

“Instead Let There Be Thanksgiving”

In what sense does Paul intend believers to be “imitators of God”? See *Ephesians 5:1, 2, NKJV*.

Paul urges the believers in Ephesus to walk in love, a call important to this section (*see Eph. 5:8, 15*). This “walking in love” (*see Eph. 5:2*) is to be modeled after Christ’s own love for us (*compare Eph. 4:32*), expressed in His atoning sacrifice. Paul affirms four things about that sacrifice: (1) It is motivated by both the love of God the Father (*Eph. 5:1*) and of Christ Himself (*Eph. 5:2*); (2) it is substitutionary, with Christ dying in our place. Christ is no passive victim but gave Himself up for us; (3) under the imagery of the Old Testament sanctuary service, Christ’s death is also a sacrifice, which is made to God; and (4) the sacrifice is accepted by God since it is “a fragrant offering” (*Eph. 5:2, ESV; compare Exod. 29:18, Lev. 2:9, Phil. 4:18*).

Ephesians 5:3–5 then introduces a section expressing concern for sexual ethics. The young converts in Ephesus are in danger of reversing their Christian calling and being drawn back into sexual behavior that would negate their Christian witness (*compare 1 Cor. 5:1–11, 1 Cor. 6:12–20, 2 Cor. 12:21*).

On the one hand, the Greco-Roman world of the first century exhibited the moral corruption and debauchery described elsewhere in the New Testament (*see 1 Cor. 6:9, Gal. 5:19, Eph. 4:17–19, Col. 3:5*). For example, banquets of the wealthy regularly featured the behaviors Paul decries in Ephesians 5:3–14: drunkenness, ribald speech, risqué entertainment, and immoral acts. In addition, urban centers provided anonymity and permissiveness that fostered immoral sexual practices. On the other hand, many in that society lived virtuous lives and served as advocates for strict morality. When the New Testament provides vice-or-virtue lists and household codes (*e.g., Eph. 5:21–6:9, Col. 3:18–4:1*), its authors mirror themes in the wider Greco-Roman world. This world, at once debauched and virtuous, helps explain Paul’s exhortations to avoid the immoral behavior practiced by the Gentiles while wishing for believers to be circumspect in their behavior and so to earn good standing among outsiders.

In what ways are Paul’s words about sexual behavior applicable to your culture, wherever you live?

Walking as Children of Light

Paul writes, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 5:6, NKJV*).

Paul has identified those who practice various sins without shame or repentance, the “sexually immoral, or impure, or who is covetous” (*Eph. 5:5, ESV*). He has offered a blunt assessment: Those who are in Christ and destined to be participants in His future kingdom should not act like those who are not (*Eph. 5:5*). He now worries over the effect of “empty words”; that is, believers might be deceived by explicit language into thinking that sexual sin is not taboo, or might even be drawn into such sins themselves (*Eph. 5:6*). To be so deceived, warns Paul, risks God’s end-time judgment, “the wrath of God” that “comes upon the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 5:6, ESV*).

The phrase “the wrath of God” is a challenging one. That it is the wrath or anger of God suggests a contrast to the usual, moody human variety (*compare Eph. 4:31*). It is the just response of a long-suffering and righteous God against stubborn commitment to evil, not a crazed, volcanic reaction to some minor infraction. Moreover, mentions of divine wrath most often occur in the context of inspired, biblical warnings about the coming judgments of God (*e.g., Rev. 6:12–17, Rev. 16:1–16, Rev. 19:11–16*). God warns of His own coming judgments—an act of grace, since human beings are “by nature children of wrath” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*), subject to those judgments.

Why does Paul exhort believers not to become “partners” or “partakers” with sinners? (*Eph. 5:7–10*).

Paul exhorts, “Walk as children of light” (*Eph. 5:8*) and continues with a further command: “and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:10, ESV*). The pagan seeks pleasure through “sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness” (*Eph. 5:3, ESV*). The believer’s goal is dramatically different, not to please oneself but to please God (*compare Rom. 12:1, 2 Cor. 5:9, Heb. 13:21*, which use the same Greek word, *euarestos*, “pleasing” or “acceptable”). The believer seeks to reflect the self-sacrifice of Christ (“walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us,” *Eph. 5:2, ESV*).

What are some of the “empty words” that in our day and age we need to be wary of?

“Awake, O Sleeper!”

Read Ephesians 5:11–14. What powerful warning is Paul giving here, and how does this apply to our present situation?

To understand Ephesians 5:11–14, it is helpful to observe that Paul repeatedly offers two exhortations, alternating between them: (1) live a God-honoring lifestyle as “children of light” (*Eph. 5:8; see also Eph. 5:1, 2, 4, 9–10, 11, 13, 14*); and (2) don’t live a sexually immoral, God-opposing lifestyle, exhibiting the “unfruitful works of darkness” (*Eph. 5:11; see also Eph. 5:3–8, 12*).

We may mine the parallel exhortations in Ephesians 5:8–10 in order to understand Ephesians 5:11. Believers are to live before unbelievers as “light in the Lord” and “children of light” (*Eph. 5:8*). The whole point of doing so is to be seen, to make clear that “the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true” (*Eph. 5:9, ESV*). Paul, then, is advocating a strategy of showing forth God’s goodness. Believers are to expose the unfruitful works of darkness by exhibiting the righteous alternative for all to see.

Meanwhile, we may take the challenging, poetic language of verses 13 and 14 as Paul’s daring assertion that believers, by exhibiting “the fruit of the Spirit” (*Eph. 5:9*), may win worldlings to faith in Christ. The Spirit is like light and reveals hidden things: “But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light” (*Eph. 5:13, 14, ESV*). When decadent living is exposed by the light, worldlings may see their behavior for what it is (“it becomes visible”), futureless and wrath-bound (*Eph. 5:5, 6*), and experience a darkness-to-light transformation (“for anything that becomes visible is light,” *ESV*), the very change that Paul’s Ephesian readers have experienced as believers themselves (*Eph. 5:8*).

What are we to make of the poem or hymn in Ephesians 5:14, which uses language associated with the resurrection of the dead at the end of time (*compare Eph. 2:1, 5*) to issue a clarion call to awaken from spiritual slumber and experience the transforming presence of Christ? Since Isaiah 60:1–3, which Paul seems to reflect, is directed to God’s people Israel, we may view the hymn/poem of Ephesians 5:14 as a powerful appeal to Christian believers to awaken to their role as missionaries, refractors of the light of Christ in a darkened world (*compare Phil. 2:14–16, Matt. 5:16*).

How do you live the kind of lifestyle that can expose works of darkness for what they are?

Snapping Up the Bargains

Paul concludes Ephesians 5:1–20 with two clusters of exhortations, Ephesians 5:15–17 and Ephesians 5:18–20, completing a section with sustained interest in sexual purity. The first cluster begins with the exhortation, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise” (*Eph. 5:15, ESV*), restated as “do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*). In between is a call to make “the best use of the time” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV*).

Consider Paul’s exhortations to live in a way that reflects prayerful, discerning wisdom (*Eph. 5:15–17*). What is the difference between walking not as fools but “wise”? Also, what does “redeeming the time” mean?

In Ephesians, Paul has repeatedly used the common Old Testament metaphor of “walking” for how one lives (*Eph. 2:2, 10; Eph. 4:1, 17; Eph. 5:2, 8*). Here he uses the metaphor to encourage intentional discipleship. Just as you should “watch your step” when walking on a rough or darkened path, believers should “look carefully then how you walk” (*Eph. 5:15, ESV*). Because Ephesians 5:15 finds a parallel in Ephesians 5:17, we may look there for a definition of what it means to live as wise people. We do not look within for wisdom. To be wise is to reach beyond ourselves, to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*).

Paul also encourages intentional discipleship with a vivid image. In the phrase “making the best use of the time” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV; compare “redeeming the time,” NKJV*), Paul uses the verb *exagorazō* (*compare Col. 4:5*). Drawn from the marketplace, it is an intensive form of the verb “to buy” and means “to snap up the bargains” on offer as we await Christ’s return. “Time” here is the Greek word *kairos*, which describes a moment of opportunity. The “time” until the end is a promising period to be used to the full. It is also a challenging time because “the days are evil” (*Eph. 5:16, ESV; compare Eph. 6:13, Gal. 1:4*) and because “the course of this world” is dominated by “the prince of the power of the air” (*Eph. 2:2, ESV*).

As believers look toward the return of Christ, they live in a difficult time, one that Paul portrays as a hazardous but rewarding marketplace. They are to be as attentive in their use of the time that remains as are bargain hunters during a brief sale that offers steep discounts. Though we can’t buy salvation, the imagery is still apt: take promptly what is offered us in Christ.

Spirit-Filled Worship

In Ephesians 5:18–20, Paul imagines Christians gathered to worship. What does he depict them as doing in that worship?

In his final argument in Ephesians 5:1–20, Paul urges believers to turn away from the mind-numbing use of wine and instead experience together the presence and power of the Spirit. Paul bans drunkenness (probably with a quotation from Proverbs 23:31 in the Greek version of the Old Testament), suggesting he has in mind the injunctions against the use of alcohol as seen in the wisdom literature (*Prov. 20:1, Prov. 23:29–35*). The evil things that come in the wake of drunkenness include crude, sexually explicit speech, mindlessness, immorality, and idolatry (*Eph. 5:3–14*). These are to be exchanged for thoughtful, Spirit-inspired worship of God. Paul's exhortation to be filled with the Spirit is a key one that is modified by a series of verbs in Ephesians 5:19–21 ("speaking"; "singing and making melody"; "giving thanks"; "submitting yourselves").

Paul here applies the exhortation to "be filled with the Spirit" (*Eph. 5:18*) corporately, imagining believers gathering in Spirit-inspired worship of God that nourishes unity (*Ephesians 4*) and that stands in contrast with egocentric, pagan behavior and worship (*Eph. 5:1–18*). In this sketch of early Christian worship, musical praise dominates. It has been argued that the church was born in song; and this passage, together with Colossians 3:16, provides the best evidence for the claim (*compare Acts 16:25, James 5:13*).

There is a "horizontal" element to worship since, in singing, church members are in a sense "speaking to one another" (*Eph. 5:19, NKJV*). However, the specific object of the musical praise is the Lord, which, as indicated in Ephesians 5:20, identifies "the Lord Jesus Christ" (*compare Col. 3:16*). The thanksgiving of Ephesians 5:20, described in parallel to the musical praise of Ephesians 5:19, is to be offered "unto God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the phrase "spiritual songs," the adjective "spiritual" (Greek, *pneumatikos*) highlights the role of the Holy Spirit in worship since the term describes songs that are inspired by or filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul's sketch of early Christian worship, then, portrays all three members of the Godhead as active participants.

How can you use music to enhance your own worship experience?

Further Thought: Looking back at Ephesians 5:1–20 as a whole, we watch Paul take a strong stance against sin and evil, especially in the form of sexual immorality and crude speech. He is unwilling to accept the presence of corrupt behavior among the people of God. Instead, he calls the believers in Ephesus to a high standard of conduct and to embrace their identity as the “beloved children” of God and as “saints,” or holy ones (*Eph. 5:1–10, ESV*). He dares to believe that when the Christians in community do so, they shine a light into the darkness, drawing their neighbors away from self-defeating lifestyles and into God’s grace and truth (*Eph. 5:11–14*).

Paul imagines the church, buoyed by a renewed commitment to “walk as children of light” while they await Christ’s return (*Eph. 5:8; see also Eph. 5:15, 16*) and blessed by the presence of Christ (*Eph. 5:14*), gathering to worship. As they are motivated by their status “as beloved children” of God and by Christ’s death for them (*Eph. 5:1, 2, ESV*) and are filled with the Spirit (*Eph. 5:18*), their shared worship is characterized by energy and joy as together they sing thanksgiving praise to their Lord, Jesus Christ, and to God the Father. With a firm grip on heavenly realities, they celebrate their hope for the future, rooted in the story of what God has done, is doing, and will accomplish through Jesus Christ their Lord (*Eph. 5:18–20*).

Understood in this way, the passage becomes far more than a set of disconnected commands about Christian living. It becomes a prophetic call concerning Christian identity, commitment, community, and worship in the last days, a pathos-filled invitation to “snap up the bargains” on offer in the days until Christ’s return (*Eph. 5:16*).

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Confronted today with a viral culture that preaches its values 24/7/365 through a withering array of media, how can believers adopt Paul’s high standards?
- 2 What strategies might believers today employ to “discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (*Eph. 5:10, ESV*) and to “understand what the will of the Lord is” (*Eph. 5:17, ESV*)?
- 3 Someone might argue that Paul’s ban against speaking of sexual immorality among believers (*Eph. 5:3, 4*) means that we should not deal with issues of sexual misbehavior and abuse. Why is that an inappropriate conclusion?
- 4 In what ways does our contemporary society reflect similar pagan practices to those that Paul dealt with in his time?

Diapers on Grocery List

By AMY McHENRY

One Friday morning, I was doing the weekly shopping at our local grocery store in Beirut, Lebanon. My husband, Peter, was buying apples and granola bars for the Pathfinders' weekend hike, and I was getting the family food. We serve as missionaries teaching biology at Middle East University.

As I went upstairs to get some disinfectant and dish soap, I glanced down the diaper aisle and saw someone looking at diapers. I thought to myself how hard it must be for people who need diapers in Lebanon. The financial situation is extremely difficult, with the Lebanese currency having lost more than 90 percent of its value in two years and the cost of goods skyrocketing. More than 80 percent of the country lives below the poverty line.

Suddenly a command popped into my head, "Buy a package of diapers."

I was surprised at this sudden thought. "Lord, is that You?" I asked. "Why would I buy diapers? The youngest of my three children is 10 years old!"

"Buy a package of diapers."

I started to walk toward the escalator.

"Lord, I don't even know anyone with a baby who needs diapers."

The command became more insistent, "Buy a package of diapers."

I walked back to the diaper aisle and prayed, "OK, Lord, I'll buy some diapers, and You'll just have to show me later who they are for. What size should I get?" I grabbed a package of size 3 diapers and continued shopping.

When my husband and I met at the car, I told him, "Don't be surprised if you see a package of diapers in the trunk. The Lord told me to purchase them. They're a gift, but I don't know who they're for yet." We drove home.

The next day at church, I saw a friend whose wife works with refugee families in Beirut. We chatted for a while, and I asked him, "Do you think your wife might know someone who needs diapers? The Lord told me to get some yesterday, and I don't know who they are for." He promised to ask her.

That evening I received a text from him. "When I told my wife your story about the diapers, she started to cry," he wrote. "Tomorrow she will be visiting two families who need diapers. Can we pick them up tonight?"



A short while later, as we hugged and chatted at the door, I handed her the diapers that God had put on my grocery list. I learned that she works with more than twenty families who need diapers and can't afford them. Now I know to put diapers on my grocery list more often.

Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in the Middle East and around the world.