

Fil-Am Community Church

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6 January 2013

“Living Wisely in the New Year”

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.”

Eph. 5:15-17 NIV

I'm sure you've noticed that each year almost all the major news magazines put out an issue with special pictorial sections recalling people and events that made news during the previous year.

Many magazines also include articles by experts predicting what they expect to see happening in the years ahead. Some even go so far as to make predictions covering 10, 20, or more years in the future. In the past, a few of these predictions have proven amazingly accurate, while others couldn't have been more wrong.

For example, back in 1967, experts predicted that by the turn of the century technology would have taken over so much of the work we do that the average American work week would be only 22 hours long, and that we would work only 27 weeks a year. As a result, one of our biggest problems would be in deciding what to do with all our leisure time.

Well, I don't know about you, but that prediction certainly missed the mark as far as my life was concerned!

In fact, most of us seem to be very busy. We're always in a hurry. We walk fast, and talk fast, and eat fast. And after we eat, all too often, we stand up and say, "Excuse me. I've gotta run."

So here we are, at the first Sunday of 2013. I wonder how we'll do this year? Will we be as busy? Will we make any better use of our time? In 359 days, when this year is over, will we be looking back with joy, or with regret? Will we be looking at the future with anticipation, or with dread?

There is a passage of Scripture that I believe can be of help to us as we look forward to the rest of 2013, if we'll listen to it. The passage is Ephesians 5:15-17, and here is what it says, *"Be very careful, then, how you live not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."*

It's clear that the apostle Paul wants his hearers to live wisely. In fact, he emphasizes that because he says, "be very careful". Another version of the Bible says, "Pay careful attention." In other words, he is saying, "Don't miss this. It's very important."

So, how do you live wisely? What does it mean to live wisely? How do you not get distracted by all things around you, good and bad, that are competing for your attention? There's just a lot of noise around us that sometimes it's hard to make wise and godly decisions in life. How do you live not as unwise but as wise?

I hope to answer that question by looking at some important lessons that we need to consider from the passage we just read. One important lesson is that

I. OUR TIME ON THIS EARTH IS LIMITED

First of all, we must be very careful how we live because our time on this earth is limited.

The Psalmist wrote, *"Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life"* (Psalm 39:4). And again, *"The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength...they quickly pass, and we fly away"* (Psalm 90:10).

Now, I realize that for some of you younger folks, 70 or 80 years sounds like a long, long time. In fact, I can remember when I thought anyone over 40 was ancient. But not anymore. My children, in fact, think I'm ancient.

So, it's all rather relative, isn't it? For example, for teenagers in love talking together in the car, an hour or two seems like a blink of an eye. But for mom and dad worrying about what's going on out in that car, an hour or two seems like an eternity.

The Psalmist also tells us to number our days so that we will develop a heart of wisdom. Do you know that there's an app for that? It's called Death Clock and you can download it from Apple's app store for 99 cents. But you can also go to their web site. What it does is that it keeps track of how much time you have left to live. You enter your date of birth, sex, whether you smoke, weight, height, outlook on life, alcohol consumption, country where you live and then it tells you at what age you'll die. I tried it and it said that I'll live to be 88 years old. Suddenly, I still feel young. Translated into days, I have about 13,149 days more to live.

But wait a minute. Neither you nor I have a guarantee of even one day more to live.

In fact the Bible tells us not to count on tomorrow because tomorrow may not come for you or for me. All we have is right now. So our time on this earth is valuable because it is very limited. Since it is limited, what do we do? We do what the apostle Paul says, which is another important lesson to learn,

II. MAKE THE MOST OF EVERY OPPORTUNITY

Make "the most of every opportunity." And he gives a reason, "because the days are evil."

We should make the most of every opportunity because life is very, very short and we only have so many opportunities.

A man went to his doctor to find out why he had been having such severe headaches. The doctor ran some tests and after a few hours called the man into his office. "I have terrible news," he told the patient. "Your condition is terminal." "Oh, no!?" the man cried. "How long do I have?" "Ten ..." began the doctor. "Ten what?" the patient interrupted. "Days? Months? Years?" "Nine," continued the doctor, "eight, seven, six ..."

Jesus said that Satan is a robber and a thief, and one of the things he tries to rob from us is our time because time is a very precious possession.

Satan is also the great tempter. And so, he tempts us in the same way that he tempted Eve so that we will waste our time wallowing in sin instead of living wisely.

Just think of the time wasted in sinning. Think of the time wasted in bars or in gambling casinos or in shallow affairs. Think of the time wasted in

gossiping or spreading rumors. Or think about all the time wasted worrying. Worrying is a sin. It shows a lack of faith in God. Satan is a thief and a robber!

I, myself, wasted valuable time because I succumbed to Satan's temptation of turning my back against God. Because of setbacks in my early Christian life I thought God didn't care about me and I turned away from him. Ten years, ten long precious years were wasted because of that.

The days are evil, Paul says to the Christians in Ephesus. These Christians in Ephesus, a prominent Greek city in the time of Paul, lived in a time when there was so much evil.

You see, Ephesus was a religious center where one of the seven wonders of the world, the Temple of Artemis, was located. The Ephesians worshipped this false Greek goddess. So, idolatry was full-blown in this city. Also, Ephesus was home to several coliseums or amphitheaters where gladiators fought each other to the death. It was a favorite sport in the city.

Likewise, we live in a time where evil is rampant. Idolatry is everywhere. People worship false gods. There is a proliferation of false teachers and false religions. Not only that. People also worship personalities and celebrities. They also worship money and houses and cars. Some people's altars are the computer and the TV. They're wasting their time in all of this.

Then also, our society is fostering a culture of death. Some people kill innocent, helpless unborn babies. They have also killed prayer and Bible-reading in schools which have come back to haunt them. Because a number of children who have grown up in schools without prayer and Bible-reading

have returned to kill children in schools. People are also starting to kill the family unit because of these same-sex marriages that's unheard of even in ancient Ephesus.

And all around us we see crimes being committed against people and properties. What was true in ancient Ephesus is also true today. The world hasn't changed. That's why Paul says, "make the most of every opportunity." This year, we have the opportunity to turn our life around if we've been going down the path of destruction. We also have the opportunity to grow in our faith and get closer to God. We have the opportunity, too, to make a difference in other people's lives by influencing them toward godliness.

However, we cannot make the most of every opportunity because of a modern malady that causes stress and anxiety in our lives. Richard Swenson, a medical doctor, wrote a book in which he discusses this malady. He calls it "overload," and says that people are just plain overloaded.

For example,

1. We're overloaded with commitments. We've committed ourselves to go here and there, to take part in this activity and that social function. As a result we soon begin to burn out because we have overloaded ourselves in the area of commitments.
2. We're also overloaded with possessions. Our closets are full, and our garages are overflowing. We've gone into debt to pay for all of these things that we "simply must have." And now we're so afraid that someone will steal them. We are overloaded in the area of possessions.
3. Thirdly, we have an overload in the area of work. We get up early, fight traffic, and experience intolerable working conditions because we have to if

we're going to pay for all those possessions that we've accumulated.

4. There is also an information overload. He said that as a doctor he has to read 220 articles a month just to keep up with all the changes in his profession. And now with the internet there's an information superhighway. But the problem is that we can't possibly absorb it all. So we feel an overload in this area, too.

Well, I could go on and on, but you get the picture. There are so many demands on our time, so many good things that need to be done. But there are just 8,760 hours in this year, and we've already used 144 of them. We do want to make the most of every opportunity, so what are we to do?

The answer is, apart from "unloading" ourselves of several burdens, we need to

III. KNOW THE LORD'S WILL

Paul tells us, "...do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."

I can almost hear your thoughts. You are thinking: that's easy to say pastor, but hard to do. How do we know God's will? My answer to that is a question. **Are you listening?**

Back when the telegraph was the fastest method of long-distance communication, a young man applied for a job as a Morse Code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the office address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, busy office filled with noise and clatter, including the sound of the telegraph in the background. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man filled out his form and sat down with the seven other applicants in the waiting area. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They assumed that the young man who went into the office made a mistake and would be disqualified.

Within a few minutes, however, the employer escorted the young man out of the office and said to the other applicants, "Gentlemen, thank you very much for coming, but the job has just been filled." The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and one spoke up saying, "Wait a minute, I don't understand. He was the last to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair!"

The employer said, "I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse Code: 'If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. The job is his."

We live in a world that is full of busyness and clatter, like that office. People are distracted and unable to hear the still, small voice of God as he speaks to them. What about you? Are you tuned in to God's voice? Do you hear him when he speaks to you? **Are you listening?**

We have to tune out all the clatter around us and listen to God. God will speak to us through the study of his handbook for Christians. The Bible. God will speak to us through sermons. God will speak to us through our

IMPACT Class, our home groups, our Sunday school. God will speak to us through music. God will speak to us through the Holy Spirit who gives us impressions and insights. God will even speak to us through our circumstances. God will speak to us when we are quiet and alone with Him and are listening for Him, when we tune out all the clutter and clatter of life and truly listen for Him to speak.

A Native American and his friend were in downtown New York City, walking near Times Square in Manhattan. It was during the noon lunch hour and the streets were filled with people. Cars were honking their horns, taxicabs were squealing around corners, sirens were wailing, and the sounds of the city were almost deafening.

Suddenly, the Native American said, "I hear a cricket." His friend said, "What? You must be crazy. You couldn't possibly hear a cricket in all of this noise!"

"No, I'm sure of it," the Native American said. "I heard a cricket."

"That's crazy," said the friend.

The Native American listened carefully for a moment, and then walked across the street to a big cement planter where some shrubs were growing. He looked into the bushes, beneath the branches, and sure enough, he located a small cricket. His friend was utterly amazed. "That's incredible," said his friend. "You must have super-human ears!"

"No," said the Native American. "My ears are no different from yours. It all depends on what you're listening for."

"But that can't be!" said the friend. "I could never hear a cricket in this noise."

“Yes, it’s true,” came the reply. “It depends on what you’re listening for. Here, let me show you.”

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a few coins, and discreetly dropped them on the sidewalk. And then, with the noise of the crowded street still blaring in their ears, they noticed every head within twenty feet turn and look to see if the money that tinkled on the pavement was theirs.

“See what I mean?” asked the Native American. “It all depends on what you’re listening for.”

Friend, if you’ve tuned in to God, it doesn’t matter what’s going on around you, you can hear Him speak.

Folks, in this new year, I’m sure God has a particular will for each of us. Maybe his will is for you to become a member of this church. Maybe his will is for you to step up and volunteer for a ministry. Maybe his will is for you to become a more loving wife or husband or a more responsible mother or father. Maybe his will is for you to become more diligent in your studies. Maybe his will is for you to get out of your comfort zone and do something you’ve been afraid of doing for so long. Whatever it is, just listen to him and follow him.

As a church, what is God’s will for us? I’m sure he wants us to touch other people’s lives. I believe he wants us to reach others who are hurting, who are lost, who desperately need comfort. He wants us also to become a true church family where everyone cares for another, where people trust each other, where everyone’s focus is on others and not on themselves only. Amen?

Folks, living wisely is to be not swayed by the evil in this world. Living wisely is also to make the most of every opportunity to make a difference in other people's lives.

Many people are not living wisely, wasting their time, because they don't know God. But God is near to each of us.

In fact, he sent his own son Jesus to earth so that we may know how God loves us so much. John 3:16 says, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"*.

Jesus died for our sins. He was put to death on the cross so that our sins may be forgiven. And then, as the Bible says, on the third day he rose again. And those who believe this will receive the gift of eternal life.

Let us Pray....