

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-20)

The Days are Evil

Have you ever done something dumb? Right at the end of our vacation, we were in a hurry to get home. We unexpectedly needed to be in town by 4 pm, and it took a lot longer to get on the road than I hoped. That's when I made my first mistake. I went the wrong the way and added a half an hour to our travel time. Then I stopped for gas. Somehow, I managed to hook the hose of the gas pump onto that little metal door that covers the gas tank. It snapped the cable that runs to the little lever inside the car. So once that metal door closed, I couldn't open it again. Fortunately, I had filled the tank and closed the gas cap. But we had a couple of hundred miles to drive and if we ran out of gas, I wasn't sure I'd be able to fill the tank again.

I hate doing stupid things. I hate making my own life harder. Do you ever do dumb things? Have you ever had an accident because your brain just didn't work right? Have you ever driven across town and discovered you didn't have some vital piece of paper for whatever you went there for? Have you ever lost something only to find it in a place you already looked three times? That happened to my parents once. They were going a cruise and they couldn't find their passports. After the boat left, they found them in their carry-on bag – a place that had both searched repeatedly. Why do we do dumb things? Why are there consequences? Why are the consequences extraordinarily expensive sometimes? St. Paul tells us today. He says it very simply and his words really say it all: **the days are evil.**

I.

Now, maybe those things I listed don't really seem to be *evil* to you. What does that word mean? In the church, we use it two ways. First, we use it to mean something or someone is morally evil. The devil is evil. Jesus called him a liar and murderer. He hates God and he revels in leading us away from God. In that sense, people are evil, too. We're all born sinners and, if we're honest, we like to sin. But that's not the only way we use the word "evil." Sometimes we use it to mean the bad things that happen to us. We can speak of fires and plagues and natural disasters as being evils that happen to us.

Of course, we Christians understand that even those kinds of evils come from one central reality: sin. When God created this world, Adam and Eve were perfect. There was no moral evil in their hearts and there were no evils in this world. But the devil turned evil and rebelled against God. He tempted Adam and Eve and convinced them to sin. Then God cursed this earth. So now, evil stalks our lives. We get sick. We fight with and hurt the people we should love the most and we get hurt by those same people. We spend the best years of our lives desperately trying to make a living. Then when our "golden years" come and we retire, we suffer one ache and pain after another until we die. All those evils come from the evil that Satan and Adam set loose on this earth when Adam and Eve sinned.

Lest we think that's just unfair, we have to remember that we sin every single day. I am not the husband and father I wanted to be on the day I was married 25 years ago. I am not the pastor I wanted to be when I was ordained 25 years ago. There have been so many times and so many ways that I failed my Lord and failed the people around me. How about you? Are you as guilty as I am? We are all sinners who are guilty before God. And every single one of us contributes to the evil in this world, to the suffering of people we love and people we hate and people we don't even know. Sometimes, it's as simple as being stupid or impatient or inattentive. Then an accident happens and it costs everybody time and money and personal anguish and guilt. Sometimes, it's worse than that. We're selfish. We're greedy. We're lustful. And everyone pays the price.

Does that picture seem too grim for your life? God is good. He gives us our cars and homes and smart phones. We do have pretty good lives. But sin and evil are always there. Every evil that we suffer reminds us that the ultimate penalty for our sin is death and hell. Every sickness reminds us that we walk through the

valley of the shadow of death, and some day death will win. Every defeat and sorrow, every moment of guilt and self-doubt, reminds us that hell is waiting on the other side of the grave for every guilty sinner.

But it is not waiting for us. That's God's answer to our moral evil. Already in the Garden of Eden when God cursed the world, he also promised to send a Savior. Jesus, the Son of God, took on human flesh so that he could stand in our place. He had no evil in his heart, so no evil ever came out in his words or actions. But he suffered all the evils of this life. He knew poverty and hardship and rejection by people he loved. He felt the sting of slander and unfair attacks. He suffered more intense physical pain than most of us ever will. He suffered all that we have to face and then he died in our place. That perfect life and that innocent death bought us forgiveness. God does not see us as evil anymore. He sees us as perfect. In his courtroom, his verdict in our trial is better than "not guilty." It's "innocent." It's "holy." Just to be sure that we heard that verdict, he raised Jesus from the dead. That resurrection tells us we are forgiven for all the evil we've ever done or said or thought or felt. We will rise and live with Jesus in a world without evil and without end.

But for right now, we still live in a world that's tortured by evil. We experience the hurt it causes. We still have sinful hearts that rebel against God. So we are responsible for evil in both senses. We make stupid and costly mistakes. And we sin against each other. That's why Paul tells us today to watch the way we live. He 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."** The Christian life requires effort. Every day, we need to recommit ourselves to following Jesus.

Paul tells us to be wise. In the Bible, true wisdom is born from faith. It's not something you get from having a university degree or from being successful in life. There are plenty of smart, successful people out there with high standards of living who are spiritual morons. They know nothing of Jesus or of the life God calls us to live. If that doesn't change, they will pay for all eternity. But we know Jesus. That is wisdom. The most foolish thing we can do is neglect our faith.

Paul tells us to make the most of every opportunity. Many translations give a better reading here. They say something like, "Make the best use of your time because the days are evil." What will we do with the days and weeks and months that God gives us here? God calls us to make the most of them. What does that mean? It means to follow him. It means to reflect the love of Christ in a thousand different ways to everyone we meet. It means to be good husbands and wives, to be devoted Christian parents and faithful workers. It means to be good citizens. And it means to be good members of our church – to support its mission with our offerings, to participate in the work God gives us here with our time, to pray for our pastors and teachers and lay leaders and for all that work God gives us to do. We do all that because we know our Savior who died and rose to give us life. My friends, **the days are evil, so be wise about how you live.**

II.

This morning, we began our service with God's answer to how bad life is – he claimed Logan through the waters of holy baptism. He took a child that was born a sinner and he washed his sins away. God gave that child faith in Jesus. Logan will live in heaven because today, in his baptism, God drew a straight line between Logan's heart and Jesus' cross and empty tomb. That is how God delivers us from evil. Unfortunately, it's easy for us to forget that. It's easy for us to look for other solutions and other comforts. In the end, all the promises those other things make are empty. They only cheat us of what God wants to give us.

St. Paul points to one of the most common ways that people look for relief in a sinful world. He says, **"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."** Now, Paul does not tell us we can't have a beer with dinner or with friends. He says, "Don't get drunk." Life hurts. The days are evil. What is my response to that going to be? Do I try to just deaden my feelings? Do I find friends who will drink with me until we forget what we have to deal with? Why is that wrong? It leads to debauchery which is a big word for sin. When I was in the army, we used to call it "beer goggles." When you're drunk, certain kinds of bad behavior suddenly look good. Drunkenness and drug abuse deaden our judgment and make us willing to engage in all kinds of sin that we know we should avoid. That is never good for our faith.

In truth, you could apply Paul's point to anything that we use to avoid the pain of life. The internet, television, sports – whatever. Things that are not sinful in themselves take God's place as the one who comforts us and gives us strength and meaning for our lives. Instead of all those things, Paul tells us be filled with the Spirit. What does that mean? It means growing in our faith so that we find comfort and strength and meaning in

God's love. It means having the Holy Spirit living in our hearts so that we are able to endure all the evil that life here pours on us and still stand and rejoice in God's love.

How do we fill up with the Spirit? Paul says, **“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** What does that sound like to you? It's church. We speak to each other when we sing hymns and psalms together here. What do we speak? The gospel. The good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness. Jesus died even for our drunkenness. Jesus paid for every time we sought comfort and strength and meaning in something else. Jesus washed all that sin away in our baptisms. He made us God's children. He promised us eternal life with him. And the more we share that truth with each other, the more we fill up with the Holy Spirit.

It isn't just my job to help you grow. Pastors and people together speak the word to each other. It isn't just my job as a Christian to grow my own faith. I join with you in hearing God's word and in coming to communion and in hearing the absolution when we confess our sins. And we all grow together. Every one of us has a part in your spiritual growth just as you have a part in the spiritual growth of every single one of us.

But we all do have to pursue that growth. God's promise is that he will work when you come and hear Jesus proclaimed to you again. God will work when you come to communion and when you remember your baptism. God will work when we sing together of Jesus' forgiveness and when we confess our sins and hear that we are forgiven. God will work in our hearts to keep our faith strong in a world broken by sin. Trust his promise. **The days are evil so fill up with the Holy Spirit!**

Last Sunday, I preached for the 25th anniversary of a good friend of mine. He's going to preach this afternoon. While we were driving home, my brother called to tell me that our aunt had died. Her funeral was on Thursday in Chicago, but I just couldn't manage the eight hours of driving that going there and back would have met. That made me a little sad. My aunt never married or had children. We nephews and nieces and the three remaining siblings are all the family she had. The days are evil. People we love die and it isn't always possible even for us to mourn them the way we would like to. But Jesus is the answer to every evil we face. He died and rose for us all. We will live with him forever, free from every evil, free from all sin and guilt, free and full of God's love. Amen.