

Redeeming the time

Ephesians 5:15 – 17, “See that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be unwise, but understand that the will of the Lord is.”

Redeeming the time – buying back time that would otherwise go south – which is an instruction to the faithful which contains great encouragement. We cannot make this worse by trying. The time we are buying back was heading in the wrong direction anyway, so we can only make things better, not worse. The context is about the faithful not getting wrapped up in the habits of this world. We understand that the world is a mess. Those on the outside probably think of their behaviors as perfectly normal. To pick one example from that context that we, in our culture, can look at reasonably objectively is idolatry (verse 5). Very few people in our time and place have a little statue to which they occasionally sacrifice a chicken for the purpose of inducing their little god to help them out, perhaps financially, perhaps to overcome some health issue, perhaps to gain revenge on an enemy, or a million other reasons. We think that’s silly, but there are hundreds of millions of people in other cultures who, to this day, do exactly that. Paul says to stay away from such things. (verse 11, “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather contrast them.”) Paul’s other examples in this context, being promiscuous or greedy, hit too close to home, so we have trouble being objective.

But do we have any hope of success in this rescue of time? Most people feel under the control of overwhelming forces, so they end up just being pushed along by the events around them. But God promises that we are not in that hopeless condition while on earth. Certainly, Paul acknowledges that “the days are evil.” But Luke, Paul, and Peter all assure us that the faithful have been rescued from this present evil age. As Luke summarized the latter part of Peter’s Sermon in Acts 2:40, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” As Paul assured the faithful of Galatia who had fallen into the legalism trap, “Who [Jesus] gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age.” Or, as Peter relayed the promise in 2 Peter 1:4, “By which [as we have been summoned to God by Jesus’ character and mastery of life] have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” We have a promise of overcoming this broken world while still living in it. We have a promise of being free from the brokenness of this world while still living in it.

Paul says to walk circumspectly – inspect from the circumference – look at it from all sides; figure out all the angles. In what direction is this moment in time headed? Is it building me up, or is it hardening my heart? Is it exposing the character of Jesus, or am I fitting into the world a little too well? Since Paul already said that, left to itself, time will lead to disaster, we need to make a conscious effort to snatch a little of it back before it disappears down the drain.

How do I do that? Paul already said: wisdom. How do I grab some of that?

Already in this letter, Paul has addressed it, back in chapter 1 beginning at verse 15. Paul had heard about the faith and love of the Christians in Ephesus, so Paul prayed for them to get that wisdom:

“I, after I heard of your faith in the Lord and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your hearts being enlightened, that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints...”

Wisdom is promised to the faithful. Paul wrote something similar to the Christians of Colossae, in chapter 1, beginning in verse 9:

“For this reason we also, since the day we heard of it [their faith and love], do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God...”

Since Paul is no longer around to pray that we obtain that same godly wisdom, James outlined a method that is still available, in chapter 1 beginning in verse 5:

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind...”

Redeem the time – wisely. How do we apply that principle? Do we need to spend every waking moment on kingdom stuff to be acceptable? Remember not just the wisdom part, but also the circumspect part. Consider the practicalities of life. Of course, such pondering can lead to all sorts of self-deception, in both directions. We can fill up all our time on the seemingly all-consuming task of getting by in this world and decide that we can do no more. Or, we can feel guilty about doing the necessary things of life and enjoy nothing. Or we can destroy the things that are actually our responsibility because we spend too much time on God stuff. How do we think through this? Circumspectly.

Paul wrote about one such situation that is fraught with potential time-conflicts in 1 Corinthians 7:32 – 35, marriage, and, by extension, family. When we marry, we take on responsibilities. And those responsibilities grow. The demands of making a living, raising a family, having a marriage like Paul describes in this same chapter, takes a lot of time. Wisely and circumspectly evaluate those responsibilities. For example, your responsibilities for your children generally do not last for your whole life. Most children, eventually, go out on their own. Plan for it and prepare them for it from an early age. After that, you are likely to inherit some responsibilities for grandchildren, but, if you prepare well, that will be entertainment time, not parenting time. The same is true for your job. Think of the people in Bible times. They worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week (except Jewish people who only worked six). We work a lot less than they did. And, living in this country, we have the opportunity to prepare for retirement. Plan wisely and circumspectly for retirement, too, so that you will have time for the kingdom when you are old. I worked 50 years for this opportunity.

“Understand what the will of God is.” Perhaps a better way to state that is “understand what God desires.” Over the centuries, people have remanufactured that “will of God” line to imply that somehow we need to figure out what God’s plan is so we can get on board or we will get left behind. First, God cannot have an absolute plan for how things should go. We all make hundreds if not thousands of choices every day. God would be having to re-work His plan trillions of times a day so that His plan could start from what is (as caused by the choices of billions of people) and plot a course to where He wants it to end up. None of God’s plans would last more than a nanosecond before it would need to be modified because of someone’s choice. No, God’s “will,” God’s desire is clearly stated in 1 Timothy 2:4, “God desires [wills] all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” Clearly, God is not going to get His way. But, that short statement covers God’s will. In light of that, why did God build this place and what was and is His objective? Knowing why we are here and what God’s plans are is the best way toward figuring out how to redeem the time. We don’t want to have plans that we may think are really great but that actually run counter to what God has in mind.

We need to get rid of the notion, that so many have, that God has everything planned out. People have great difficulty figuring out what to do and how to handle life because they think that there is some great, detailed master plan that God has set in motion, and, since there isn't, they confuse themselves trying to figure it out. God's plan is to make a big family that will last. Free will is essential to making that happen unless God wants a family of puppets that He preprogrammed to act as He planned, which would be a little weird. No, God wants to build a family composed of spirits who have the liberty to make their own choices and who are therefore responsible for the choices they make. God determined, before creation, that each family member must have two characteristics to allow this family to make it over the long haul: mutual trust and selfless concern. Without those two characteristics, you don't get adopted into the family. The other characteristics are a matter of liberty, which is what makes life, including eternal life, interesting. So, how do those characteristics happen? God built the universe as an incubator for faith. Humans don't get to see God up close and personal while on this earth. We choose to follow God's lead because we trust Him. Angels, on the other hand, have had no opportunity to develop faith on their own, since they live with the Big Guy, so they learn faith by watching us, the earth-bound spirits. If we will opt for trusting God, faith, God will give us the selfless concern part, as in Romans 5:5, "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts [speaking to the faithful, not everyone on earth] by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." We need to know why we are here, in simple terms, to be able to redeem the time.

Paul wrote about the same "redeeming the time" to the Christians of Colossae (in northwestern Turkey), in Colossians 4:5 – 6, "Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one."

"Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time." A major purpose of a wisely spent life on earth is evangelism. Paul wrote two whole chapters about it in 2 Corinthians chapters 4 and 5, and made comments about it in 1 Thessalonians 1:8, 1 Peter 3:15, Ephesians 3:10, and 1 Corinthians 2:12 and 13. Rather than reading all those passages, I will stick to the one sentence that summarizes the concept, 2 Corinthians 4:13, "Since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written [in Psalm 116:10], 'I believed and therefore I spoke.' We also believe and therefore speak." Evangelism is one of the essential characteristics of God's version of faith. We, the faithful, redeem the time that would otherwise be wasted, be squandered, be used unprofitably, by talking to others about the good news from God.

But how do we do that? Evangelism is a scary thought to most solid, wonderful, church-going people. Some run to one extreme and quote St. Francis of Assisi as saying, "Preach the gospel; use words if necessary." First, Francis of Assisi was not an inspired writer. Second, to anyone's knowledge, he never said or wrote that. Third, Paul wrote the opposite. Words are necessary. Of course, so are actions that are consistent with what you say. Paul quoted either Isaiah or Ezekiel (since both wrote the same thing), that inconsistent behavior causes the name of God to be blasphemed (Romans 2:24). In simple language, if we do not practice what we preach, no one will believe what we say. The same idea is also in 1 Timothy 6:1 and Titus 2:5. So, most people picture really embarrassing scenarios and colossal failings. That's not the picture Paul paints.

First, Paul says, "Let your speech be with grace." Grace is a well-integrated and consistent set of positive character traits. Let your speech be humble and patient and kind toward all those who think differently than you do. As in 2 Timothy 2:24, "A servant of God must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition."

First, have the attitude of finding common ground about God so you have a place from which to build. Ask what the other person thinks, and listen to the answer. You don't have to be able to respond immediately. Rather, think about what the other person said and come back later with suggestions of things they might think about.

Second, be interesting, "seasoned with salt." Be interesting – salty – humorous – rememberable – simple. Paul wrote that he was unskilled in speech, not eloquent. Yet, when you read Acts, when he preached in various synagogues across Turkey and Greece, the audiences understood what he was saying and came to immediate conclusions. They were not confused. Some wanted to hear more; some wanted to kill him. Paul was so clear that those who disagreed were immediately able to understand that they did not like what he said.

Paul wrote about this redeeming of time, "That you may know how you ought to answer each one." Adapt to the barriers and needs of each one. And you do not need to be able to do it on the spot. As I said, listen, think about it, then come back and ask for clarification, now armed with your analysis of the parts of the other person's ideas that may need some work. As time goes on, you will get better and better at this because people tend to have the same ideas and tend to ask the same questions. So, once you have thought it through a few times, you will find yourself being already prepared for the next person.

Bottom line, make the message full of joy, peace, mercy, and hope. The Good News is not about condemnation but about how to achieve a life on earth that is worth living, followed by an eternal life that is even better. Imagine, you get adopted into an earthly family of God while you are still breathing in which you receive comfort and support, through which you learn how to handle life on a broken planet, and experience a trusting and loyal family. We offer a result of being happy to be alive, having goals and skills, having people who care. We offer a realistic, not delusional, means by which to have peace of mind, to defeat anxiety. We offer a fix to the things you don't like about yourself. And, we offer a realistic and confident expectations of improvement in this life and even more in the next.

But how? Does everyone need to sign up for theology school? No, the method is as simple as the message: grow faith. How? Do we sit and meditate and hum? Do we pray on our knees for hours at a time? No. Growing faith has eight tracks. Use what works at the moment. You don't need to attack your self-perceived weaknesses head-on. If that worked, you would have already done it. Rather, try these methods (by the way, you can get a list of all the references for these on our web site under Characteristics of Faith):

- Understand the resurrection as evidence. Evidence is the key. Evidence is what sets Christianity apart from all other belief systems. Learning about the historical and archeological evidence for the events in the Bible may not seem pertinent to anger-management, but it works to grow faith which in turn enables the indwelling Spirit to do its job of fixing that loose bolt in your frontal cortex. Knowing the evidence gives substance to your hope.
- Recognize the need for a sacrifice (and know what a sacrifice is: a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God). Most people have been taught some variation of pagan faith, that sacrifice is actually an attempt to manipulate God, to either get what I want or to get God off my back. Most church-goers have been taught to focus on the death and the blood. But how many of you contemplate the death and dismemberment of the meat you buy at the market? No, you are thinking about how good it is going to taste. Jewish people thought the same way when they brought a sacrifice to the Temple. They looked forward to the big family meal they were going to have with that

sacrifice as the main course. And, in that meal, they celebrated that God was pushing aside, for the umpteenth time, their sidesteps and missed objectives (the literal meaning of trespass and sin, respectively) so that they could be a part of the nation of God again, that God would trust them again, despite the past.

- Accept of the Word of God as true. This is not blind acceptance, but an extension of the evidence characteristic. Learning about how the Bible came to us over 19 centuries and by way of various languages is a faith-building exercise. Translators were not perfect. They were influenced by their upbringing and training just as we are. But, you can learn about the checks and balances used in the translation process, and you can learn to use the translation tools yourself. You don't need to be a linguist. You don't even need to be able to recognize the Greek or Hebrew alphabets. Learn how the copies got to us and how the accuracy of those manuscripts was verified. And, remember who wrote them – people who could raise the dead, heal the sick, cast out demons, and predict the future.
- A realistic hope of heaven. We have a realistic hope, based on reality, rather than believing in belief. Each of us may have a confident expectation based on seeing the indwelling Spirit working through each of us. For many, that's a difficult, even scary thought. The idea of being right with God has been taught to them as (1) show up, (2) do the rituals, (3) put money in the plate, and (4) be a good person. They have no expectation of accomplishing the superhuman. Those of faith do. When we see ourselves operating selflessly (1 John 3:18 – 19, 4:12 – 13), we have evidence that God has accepted us, so our hope is based on God's confirmation, not my wishful thinking. When we see ourselves overcoming, ourselves in areas we have never been able to master before (Romans 8:13), we have evidence that God has accepted us, so our hope is based on God's confirmation, not my wishful thinking.
- Trust in the promises of God, which implies knowing what the promises are. Many good, church-going people believe in promises that they have been taught but that God never made. Many believe, if they are good, bad stuff won't happen to them, or they won't get sick, or they will be financially secure. But those hopes did not work out so well for Jesus and the apostles and the early Christians. They had it rough. Read from Romans to Revelation, specifically looking for what God has promised to all the faithful, not just some small subset. My personal list has well over 800. Knowing what God promised gives us confidence to let God handle the things He promised to handle.
- Take on the divine nature (the obedience of faith). We are not just those who obey the God of judgment in hopes of being good enough on Judgment Day. The faithful are given the indwelling Spirit to effect character development. We are promised that we will, if we will get out of the way, be transformed into the character of Jesus. We are not just woeful sinners, but rather confident optimists, which goes a long way toward having the courage to make the right choices. If we are confident that this character development is happening, we can step out and try that at which we have been unsuccessful in the past.
- Evangelism. Our optimism, peace, and joy should be a draw to outsiders, because they have consistently failed to obtain them.
- And, finally, growth. That's a good-news-bad-news characteristic. Most churches focus on the bad news – they focus on the mistakes, the sin. But that is not how the Good News works. We are to focus on the progress we are making. Because growth is an essential characteristic, we can be assured that we will never reach the top. If we did, growth would

necessarily stop. Instead, we revel in the progress. That's how God planned it from before the beginning.

Redeem the time. You cannot make things worse. The world is already broken. The faithful are promised a family, both now and forever.