

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
September 25, 2016

## **Making the Most of Every Opportunity**

Ephesians 5:1-21

First, I commend you. By being here for worship, you've chosen wisely. After another week of following Jesus and living out your faith in the unique circumstances and contexts of your daily life, you've come back to this place where we sing, pray, and preach. Another Sunday has been given to us, the window of opportunity has opened, and you've seized it. You're here in the Lord's house, on the Lord's Day, with the Lord's people, to offer the Lord praise and thanks. That's a sign of wisdom.

But worshiping the Lord with your life, in between Sundays, demands just as much, if not more, wisdom. That too is part of why you're here, to gain further wisdom and to grow in it. To become a wiser person. To have a deeper understanding of the Lord's will. To get insight on how to embody and practice his will in view of his coming kingdom. In short, you're here because you want to be wise, not foolish, whether you're at church or away from the church.

"Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (vv. 15-16). That's the exhortation that opens the last section of today's Scripture reading. Notice how these verses operate with a strong sense of time. Not just time in the sense of clock or calendar, but time in a more qualitative sense. Time in the sense of opportunity or occasion. Some of you may recognize the King James rendering of this verse: "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil." The Greek word translated here as "time" is "kairos." It means an opportune moment or season that calls for some kind of decision or action. This isn't the kind of time you measure in seconds, minutes, or hours. It's the kind of time that you gauge by signs, conditions, and circumstances.

It's one thing to define fall as a period of time that began this past Thursday, September 22, and will last until winter officially begins on December 21. But it's another thing to define fall by cooler temperatures, autumn leaves, pumpkin farms, the return of football, and the latest aroma from Yankee Candle. When we see, and smell, these kinds of things, we know that we're entering a whole new season, not just another block of time that just happens to have different characteristics from the rest of the year. And with this new season will come certain expectations and opportunities that might not be there during winter, spring, or summer. Some things will be the same, but other things will be different, and we want to use the time in a way that maximizes what's uniquely available to us during this part of the year.

When we make this kind of transition from one season to another, we have a fresh opportunity to realize that time passes. One season winds down, and another gets underway. We become more and more aware of the shortness of life, and the seasons within it. As Dr. Seuss once wrote:

How did it get late so soon,  
It's night before it's afternoon.

December is here before it's June.  
 My goodness how the time has flown.  
 How did it get late so soon?<sup>1</sup>

According to our text, our own concept of time isn't the only place where it gets late so soon. Even on God's calendar, it has gotten later than it used to be. The end that began in Christ moves on toward the full reconciliation of all things in him. Here in the present, we who confess him as Lord are called to a distinctive way of life in a world that resists his reign. So we're told to be very careful, very wise, about how we live. That includes seizing every opportunity to do the will of God.

"Making the most of every opportunity" is the way our text puts it (NIV). Other translations render it, "making the most of the time" (NRSV), or "making the best use of the time" (ESV). The terminology is slightly different, but the essence is the same, namely, staying alert and responsive to opportunities to proclaim and practice the love and life of God's kingdom. The Greek word behind this expression is borrowed from the commercial vocabulary of the marketplace. It has to do with snapping up a bargain while it's available.

It's hard to think of anything that motivates us like a bargain. Some stores like to market everything they sale, all the time, as a good deal. It's no accident that one company has the name "Ollie's Bargain Outlet: 'Good Stuff Cheap.'" Or there's the option of dropping the price on certain items for a particular period of time. Advertising slogans like "Don't miss out" or "Limited time offer" or "Hurry, the clock is ticking" have a way of stimulating our interest and moving us off the couch and into the store aisles. Of course, sometimes you don't even have to leave the comfort of your sofa. If you're watching your favorite home shopping channel and a box in one corner of the screen is telling you the cost and the remaining quantity of that particular item, coupled with a clock counting down the minutes remaining to call before the sale expires, then why get up? Just seize the opportunity, pick up your phone, make the call, and snap up that bargain while it lasts.

When it comes to bargain hunting, we know plenty about seizing the opportunity. The same should be true about the ways that we deal daily in the business of God's kingdom. Day in and day out, we're continually presented with opportunities to participate in God's redemptive mission in the world. In order to take advantage of those moments and make the most of those occasions, we need to stay alert and be responsive when a situation presents itself. We need to have more of an opportunity mindset than an efficiency mindset.

But that's hard for us. We're so accustomed to lives that are driven by the calendar and the clock. Too many of us are continually working against some sort of deadline. Our focus is on doing as much as we can in as little time as possible. In the process, our lives become primarily an exercise in efficiency and productivity. But from a Christian standpoint, living wisely is about more than just a list of accomplishments and a day planner that's jam packed. Living wisely isn't about filling up every minute. It's about making the most of opportunities.

In his book, *Awakening the Quieter Virtues*, Gregory Spencer writes:

One of the louder virtues in American culture is efficiency. It's what makes the clock of capitalism tick. We are remarkably skilled at getting things done, at thinking "yes, we can," and then putting forth our best effort to accomplish many tasks in a short time. Often efficiency serves us well. But this way of valuing time can tick-tock into our worldview, leading us to measure everything by the stopwatch. Time: we march against it, beat it, save it, manage it, spend it, and try not to kill it or waste it. If efficiency becomes a dictator

instead of a servant, generosity is usually oppressed. We feel we must fill days with industrious busyness.

When my daughters were young, I too frequently bemoaned how little time I could give to writing. One friend said, "Your girls will only be toddlers once. Don't worry so much about being productive." Another friend gestured to my daughters and said, "Spence, *here* are your publications!" These friends encouraged me to view time . . . by the opportunity presented, time according to what the season calls for. Time well used . . . is time that appropriately meets the needs of the moment, not . . . time measured by the demands of the clock.<sup>2</sup>

I'm not trying to downplay the importance of time, and particularly the significance of how time passes. Time is one of the most precious commodities that God gives us. I'm simply saying that as a Christian, being a faithful steward of time is about recognizing and responding to people, situations, events, and experiences where you have a unique window of opportunity to do the will of God and bear witness to new life in Christ.

These windows of opportunity may be created by a variety of factors. Maybe a convergence of events during the course of the day leads you to see that this is what God wants you to do, here and now, in this moment. Suddenly God has interrupted your plans with his plans. Here before you is a person, a need, an issue, that calls for a Christian response. You need to say something, or do something, that you may not get another chance to say or do, simply because circumstances may not come into place the way they have right now. Or maybe you're at a certain stage in your life where you have particular resources, skills, or experience that can be used in certain ways to address certain needs. So you decide that this is the season of your life when you need to focus on giving yourself to others in ways that you simply couldn't in prior years. Or maybe God has called you and gifted you for particular forms of ministry in the church, and you need to put that giftedness to work now, rather than assuming there may be a better time or opportunity for service to the congregation in the future.

And sometimes, the issue isn't just opportunities, but perhaps too many opportunities. Too many options, especially when they're good options. So you need wisdom from God in order to know what are the most vital things to be doing right now. You could be doing this, or this, or this, all of which are good things. But at this point in your journey, at this spot on your path, in this set of circumstances, what are the best and most important things that you need to be focusing on, instead of trying to do everything? What is the best way for you to redeem the time, based on who you are, and where you are? Which opportunities do you need to say yes to? Which ones do you need to say no to? And which ones do you need to say maybe to, for now, until a later time?

One thing is for sure, namely, that we beware the foolishness of wasted opportunities. Be wise and watchful, so that you don't miss or squander those moments, seasons, and circumstances where your work and witness for the kingdom is needed. Dallas Willard was a spiritual teacher, mentor, and author who died a few years ago. Shortly before Willard's death, pastor John Ortberg asked him, "Do you regret anything?" Willard answered, "I regret the time I have wasted." A stunned Ortberg wrote:

If there is any human being on the planet who has not wasted time, it is Dallas Willard. I don't think he'd know what a television was if it hit him on the head. He is either reading or teaching or doing ministry. Or doing bits of carpentry around [his house], or mentoring students, or praying. If he's guilty of wasting time, the rest of us may as well sign up for vagrancy hell right now.

Then Ortberg explains what he thinks Willard meant by that one regret:

“Redeem the time,” the apostle Paul wrote, “because the days are evil.” I think Dallas regretted all the time he wasted, not because he compared himself to other more efficient people, but because he began to see what life could be. I remember him saying that all of us lost souls allow ourselves to live in worry and anger and self-importance and pettiness when life with God is all around us.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, life with God is all around us, every precious day, in ways we expect and often in ways we hadn’t planned on. So “be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity.”

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Brett Younger in his sermon, “Life Is Short.” Day 1 website. August 7, 2016. Accessed September 21, 2016 < [http://day1.org/7347-life\\_is\\_short](http://day1.org/7347-life_is_short)>.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Spencer, *Awakening the Quieter Virtues* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2010) 170-71.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 186-87.