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Be Careful How You Walk: Living in the World Imagined in Scripture

DAVID FLEER

Recently I was assigned to preach a sermon from Ephesians 5.15-21. I accepted the invitation and began to recite the text, immediately drawn to its rhythms and beat, its powerful images, wisdom, and ability to emphasize the essential. In this context I began thinking about our own lives, the times in which we are living, our churches, and our heritage. Out of that process the following sermon emerged.¹

Looking for wisdom? Wanting to learn again how to live as Christians? So am I, which stirs interest in Eph 5.15-21, pushing me to memorize it, ingest it, and know it by heart:

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men and women but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

But first I decided to do a little homework, and headed off to a research center where I could study this passage and dig up some information. I found myself before a two-story Romanesque library with stone colonnades, four tall pillars and a great arched entry.

This library is full of stained glass windows with images of lamps of learning, open Bibles, and men on horseback. Inside, it smells of old books. Mahogany shelves line the walls, filled with dark colored volumes like *Clarke's Commentary* and the old *Gospel Advocate*.

High on the library's stone wall this carved inscription, in Old English letters, which demands a slow reading, "The Bible . . . is to be read . . . with Imagination, that its Wisdom . . . may interpret events and its ideals . . . inspire action."²

Just as this begins to sink in, I spot what I came looking for. Over in the corner of the room stand gray metal file cabinets under a sign, "History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ." Sermon files, organized by books of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, spread out before me.

I move to the file drawer labeled Ephesians, open it and thumb through folders until I come to the assigned text, Ephesians 5. I pull out two files: one entitled, "Music in Worship" and the other, "Demon Rum." I take both folders to a long wooden reading table, sit down in an oak chair, scoot myself up against the table, reach over to pull down the little chain on the reading lamp, open the first folder, and its world comes alive.

The sermon is hand written in pencil on once white paper, yellowed with age, edges crumbling. It says it was delivered the first Friday night of a two-week gospel tent meeting in Nashville, 1906. Based on a

1. The sermon was preached, in similar form, at the Summer Celebration, Lipscomb University lectureship, July 7, 2006.

2. This inscription (modified), and some of the other images in this library scene appear on the second floor Reading Room in the Suzzallo Graduate Library, University of Washington, Seattle.

single verse, Eph 5.19, the sermon is full of word studies on *Psallo*. It is about plucking the heartstrings and the sad account of Nadab and Abihu. I can almost see the preacher holding forth for over an hour on this summer's evening, his outline, laced with Bible passages, inscribed on a white sheet that hangs before the congregation.³

Now I look at this Christian assembly. These are rural people, hard working people, farming people for whom life is not easy. They are listening with great seriousness. What captures my imagination is the robust beauty of their congregational singing, these poor farm folk lifting their voices, not needing a hymnal, singing from their hearts,

This world is not my home,
I'm just a passing through,
my treasures are laid up
somewhere beyond the blue.

Such passion and integrity—so stirring.

Their horses and buggies are tied outside the tent. After the service, adults mill around, gather in clusters, have conversations about the coming harvest, about weddings and recipes. Children are out on the perimeter, running and laughing, playing and talking. People are eating homemade ice cream.

These are familiar people, the treasures of our memory, full of conviction, zeal, and love.

I open the second folder, Nashville, 1926, a sermon on Social Drinking, from a single verse, Eph 5.18. This sermon moves all over the scriptures, including the preacher's lively enactment of Proverbs 23,

Alcohol bites like a serpent
And stings like an adder
Your eyes will see strange things
And your mind will utter perverse things
When you awake from your stupor
You'll say, 'I'll have another drink.'

People laugh and slap their knees, this Prohibition era sermon on the ills of social drinking.

Everyone appears to be holding a black covered Bible, and they all know their way around it. The preacher cites a passage and you hear the flutter of pages turning to that particular scripture. It seems so pious.

The sermon ends. As people gather to talk, a young boy who looks to be about eight, wearing farm britches, a little blue work shirt, and suspenders, stands before me and says, "Mister?"

I look down and see his furrowed eyebrows meet and his dark lips form a circle as he asks, "Mister, are you from these parts?"

"No," I say, "I'm from Detroit, the motor city."

He asks, "Mister, are you a social drinker?"

I pause. I say, "I've never met Jack Daniels . . . better stay away from John Barley Corn."

He looks at me, steps back, turns and runs to his friends to report his satisfaction, I assume, with the response he's just heard.

I close the folders with their sermons and images, turn off the reading light, push back the chair, stand and walk to the file cabinet, replace the sermon folders where I'd found them, and shut the metal drawer.

As I leave the library, framed portraits and photographs are hanging on the walls of the hall near the exit. I glance over my shoulder at the past and notice the early preachers Alexander Campbell and David

3. This image is inspired by the photograph of Charles Taylor, Paducah, Kentucky, 1920, in Michael W. Casey, *Saddlebags, City Streets, Cyberspace: A History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1995), 180.

Lipscomb.

But I am too weak with nostalgia to stop, too dizzy with memories of Grandpa and Grandma, and their grandparents. Mostly, I am thirsty for communities of faith and hungry for the Bible. Not just an appetizer, a single verse here and there—I want more. Not a proof text—I want the whole thing, the world scripture imagines for us, that God imagines for us to live.

I open the library doors and step outside to breathe the hazy, heavy air of Nashville, Tennessee in July 2006, and sit down on the library's top step to get my bearings, close my eyes and remember these words of Eph 5.15-21.

What first catches my attention is the rhythm

Don't be	But
Unwise	Wise
Foolish	Understand the
	Lord's will
drunk with wine ...	Be filled with the
which is dissipation	Spirit

Don't—but, don't—but, don't—but; it sounds like wisdom literature. There are two roads in life:

The low road or the high road.

The wide road, which leads to destruction, or the narrow way, which leads to life.

"The street that passes useless chaff, or the path near trees planted by water where roots run deep and fruit hangs low" (Psalm 1).

This sounds like wisdom literature, where the world is black and white, right and wrong, and the instructions are clear. Like Prov 22.6, "Train up a child in the way he should go . . ." Like Benjamin Franklin, "Early to bed early to rise . . ."

Don't be unwise, foolish or filled with wine. Instead, be wise, understand the Lord's will, and be filled with the Spirit.

It is the language of coaches and parents.

"Robinson, Why'd you stop running the wind sprints?"

"I got winded, coach."

"Get back out there. No pain, no gain." That's gridiron wisdom.

Two roads.

"Sweetheart, 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'"

"But, Daddy, I think I can change him."

"I know what I'm talking about . . . lived a while . . . observed life . . . been around the block . . . listen to me, 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'"

"What about Uncle Ralph and Aunt Cindy?"

"They're an exception. 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'"

This is spiritual wisdom, "take *this* route."

The problem is, sometimes we act like spiritual teenagers, finding exceptions to the rules, imagining detours for every path, seeing everything in shades of gray.

What drives coaches and what motivates parents to dispense their wisdom is this: They're aware of what's at stake, they see the consequences, and they know where the two roads lead. This is a passage about spiritual wisdom.

What scares me about Eph 5.15-21 is the echo, "the days are evil."

“Make the most of your time,” “Redeem the day,” “Seize every opportunity,” “Take advantage of each moment,” because “the days are evil.”

I leave the library with my Bible, planning a day trip through the letter to the Ephesians, so I can hunt for the ones who make these days evil, identify the bad guys, round up the culprits and alleviate my fears.

I walk all the way through Ephesians sniffing everywhere, like a detective. By the end of the trip, several suspects are in the line-up. Most suspicious of the lot, the one whom anyone can identify, is greed. I found him in a couple of the Ephesian vice lists. Greed runs in a bad crowd. Everybody knows that. But what makes greed stand out in this world is its opposition to thankfulness (Eph 5.2-3). Greedy people aren't thankful. Greedy people want more. No wonder Paul says, “*always give thanks, in everything.*”

It's one thing to look at greed locked behind the bars of the Bible, chained to the vice list in Paul's letter to the Ephesians: “Greed in custody.” What *scares* me is knowing that greed is escaped, on the loose.

It scares me that greed isn't just an Ephesians problem. Greed lurks around every corner today.

Nothing more than a tour of the town to realize that greed is everywhere. Nothing especially evil about Nashville, but I walk past the beauty salon, into the local Krogers, into your dentist's waiting room, the local Borders—every where I walk, every magazine I thumb through, from *Martha Stewart* to *Men's Health*, I see greed walking off the pages, greed flying through the airwaves, nibbling at our ears, seeping into our mind, trying to control our lives, with words like these:

“Don't compromise quality.”

“Be innovative and stylish.”

“Pamper yourself with the luxury you deserve.”

“Exquisite and generous, sumptuous and spacious, the most respected name, state of the art.”

“Flex your investment muscles, leverage your fiscal opportunities, and put your account on steroids.”

With these words, greed has stolen its way into our hearts, and that is how we have become rich Christians in an age of hunger.

No wonder God advises us that the next opportunity we have “to upgrade to luxury status” we should say, “No thanks, we have enough.” God says that when the moment presents itself “to trade up,” to look greed square in the eye and say, “No thanks, we have enough.”

Greed is a disease that shrinks our hearts by convincing us to undervalue precious things and to overvalue worthless things. Our only safeguard against greed is—in everything—to give thanks, always, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The second suspect is the biggest surprise of all and remains the most terrifying threat to our existence. I saw this suspect while walking into first century Ephesus, where just outside the city limits stands the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Artemis is the goddess of fertility. The world thinks that Artemis is the reason for the Ephesians' wealth and fame. One Ephesian inscription, etched in stone, reads, “Artemis, is honored with shrines, sanctuaries, temples, and altars . . . everywhere.”⁴

Craftsmen in Ephesus make statues of Artemis for all Asia. The Ephesian economy is wrapped up in the worship of Artemis. Ephesus is bursting with growth because of Artemis.

That's why Demetrius the silversmith, who makes his living creating and selling little shrines of Artemis, is in the amphitheatre now, speaking to his fellow craftsmen.

Listen to his passion. He is shouting, “Our prosperity depends upon Artemis. Christianity claims that Artemis is not a God. If Artemis goes, we go—our jobs, our income, our way of life!”

Demetrius' speech enrages the silversmiths. People spill into the theater. They began to chant, “Great is Artemis . . .” And the frenzy spreads through the entire city, two hours of chanting, confusion, and chaos.

4. Cited in John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 243.

Why, Paul nearly loses his life in Ephesus (Acts 19.21-41).

Evidence is everywhere of the second suspect, “the principalities and powers”, whose only morality is their own survival; whose only business is to stay in business. No wonder Paul warns the church, “Our battle is against the principalities and the powers” (Eph 6.12).

That’s what I see in Ephesus. The principalities and powers, which demoralize human beings, make false promises, suppress the truth, and numb us in the process.

Demetrius knows what the principalities and powers have always known, and know today: *if we take Christianity seriously, we threaten their existence.*

Paul says to make no alliances with the principalities and powers, to resist the principalities and powers by submitting to one another, by speaking the truth to one another. “Be careful how you walk.”

The principalities and powers are on the move today, and that *scares* me. I see evidence on the Nashville *Tennessean* front page. Iran moving toward nuclear power with the desire to employ it! North Korea testing missiles. Israel and Lebanon exploding with violence. Latest count, forty-seven countries at war, including the United States—half the world at war! Principalities and powers are on the move; the principalities and powers are a terrifying threat to our Christian existence.

The principalities and powers advance by force and violence, with bombs and bullets. But God’s kingdom lives with gratitude, thanksgiving and submission.

The principalities and powers believe that hate conquers hate, that war cures war, that violence ends violence. But someone said, “An Eye for an Eye . . . leaves a lot of people blind.” Someone said, “Darkness can’t put out darkness, darkness just makes the darkness darker.”

So, how do we walk differently? How do we walk like people of God? How? Ephesians is a prayer for the church’s imagination. Paul prays that the “eyes of our heart might be open” to see our role in God’s plans. Like the library’s stone inscription: “The Bible is . . . to be read . . . with Imagination, that its Wisdom . . . may interpret events and its ideals . . . inspire action.” That the eyes of the church’s heart might be open to see our role in God’s plans, that the church’s life might be a sign of God’s grace.

“Seize the *moment*,” he said. Opportunities and moments will present themselves tonight, tomorrow, sometime this week. During worship a moment will arise, reminding us that this world is not our home, we’re just a passin’ through.⁵ Perhaps we’ll learn to articulate Paul’s favorite hymns, to talk about a biblical worldview, to give voice to these words, “Jesus, existed in the form of God but didn’t regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, became a human being, a servant, on the cross” (Phil 2.5-11).

Singing songs of such depth that the language becomes the starting point for our thinking, the lens through which we view the world, the building blocks of our lives. So, through God’s Spirit we might deny our self interests, divest of human status, empty ourselves of human privilege, and practice our faith.

The principalities and powers work feverishly to keep the middle class and the poor separate. There will come a moment this week when we’ll see that the church can live beyond itself. When we’ll remember that “As we die with Christ in baptism, so we are resurrected to newness of life” and thrust into the struggle of good against evil, justice against injustice, and love in place of domination.

There will come a moment this week when we will have opportunity to stop speaking with the old accent of greed and violence, and learn again the language of gratitude, thanksgiving, truth telling, and fault confessing. An opportunity to say, “No!” when the principalities and powers again ask us to bless their war and violent ways.

In this moment I am reminded of the library’s photograph of David Lipscomb with his full beard, thin pressed lips, full head of freshly cut, white hair, high buttoned vest, and thin wire framed glasses.

5. A song that fell out of favor, not only because of its antiquated Stamps Baxter sound, but because we could no longer tolerate its message as we began to lay up our treasures on earth.

We stand behind the photographer who is leaning over his box camera, his head hiding under a black curtain, adjusting the lens, getting the focus. In this historic picture Lipscomb is not looking at the photographer, not toward you and me. Lipscomb seems to be looking at this moment back to scripture, trying to get his bearings, and his brown eyes are alive with the question, "How do we live in the world imagined for us in scripture, imagined in Ephesians, in this text, on this evening?"

The path before us is so clear. But the days are evil and threatening. The road ahead is possible only through the presence and power of God. How do we live in this world?

"Give thanks," God says, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."

"Submit to one another, out of reference for Christ," which happens only when we are filled with God's Spirit.

Such a life is possible for you and me, scripture imagines, through the presence and power of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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