

## **TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY**

### **EPHESIANS 5:15-21.**

*Look therefore carefully how ye walk [See then that ye walk circumspectly], not as unwise, but as wise; redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunken with wine, wherein is riot, but be filled with the Spirit; speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; subjecting yourselves one to another in the fear of Christ.*

### **THE CAREFUL WALK OF THE CHRISTIAN**

1. Paul's admonition here is designed for those who, having heard the Gospel and made a fine start in believing, immediately imagine themselves secure and think they have accomplished all. Forgetful that they are still flesh and blood, and in the world and in contact with the devil's kingdom, they live in unconcern, as if delivered from all danger, and the devil far fled. By the very reason of their security they are overcome of the devil and their own flesh, and fall unawares from the Gospel. They have just enough connection with it to be able to prate of it, boasting themselves Christians but giving no indication of the fact in their conduct.

2. Paul would tell them how, in view of these things, vigilance is essential to the Christian life. To regulate the life by keeping God's will ever before the eyes, always conforming the conduct to it – this he calls walking circumspectly and being wise. If you for a moment lose sight of God's will, the devil immediately possesses you and works pernicious results, transforming a Christian into an indolent, self-secure hypocrite; a hypocrite into a heretic and factionist; and a heretic into an open enemy. So the apostle here teaches that in all seriousness if we would secure ourselves against the craft and power of the devil we must be vigilant; we must be careful how we walk. In Satan we have an enemy bent on hindering us; on undermining our very foundation.

3. Consequently they who fail to keep earnest watch over their Christian life – that is, to have a care for soundness of belief and to gladly hear and obey the Word of God – are unwise, even foolish, and have no knowledge of God's will. They have removed the light

from before their eyes to behold instead a thing of their own imagination. They see as through a painted glass, presuming they do well in following such phantoms of their reason, until they are misled and defeated of the devil.

## **THE WORD, THE GUIDE OF THE CHRISTIAN**

4. Therefore, not without reason does Paul warn Christians to be always wise and circumspect – to keep the Word of God before them. Upon so doing depends their wisdom and understanding. Let each one make it a matter of personal concern, and especially should it be the general interest of the congregation. Where care is not observed to retain the Word in the Church, but there are admitted to the pulpit brawlers who set forth their own fraudulent doctrines, the Church is injured; the congregation will soon be as the preacher. Again, if the individual fails to regulate his daily life – the affairs of his calling – by the Word of God; if he forgets the Word and absorbs himself in accumulating wealth; if he is tangled with secular interests, he soon becomes a cold and indolent Christian, then an erring soul, and finally utterly disregards God's will and his Word. It is for these reasons God so frequently commands us in the Scriptures continually to explain and apply his Word, to hear it willingly and practice it faithfully, and to meditate upon it day and night. He would have our lives emanate from the Word in honor to God and gratitude to him – from the Word wherein we daily look as in a mirror. But care and diligence are necessary to bring it to pass, and we should faithfully assist each other by instruction, advice, and in other ways.

5. In my admonitions I have often enough urged those who have influence, to use all diligence in drawing the young to school, where they may receive proper instruction to become pastors and preachers; and I have earnestly advised that in cases of necessity ample financial provision be made for students. But, alas, few communities, few States, are interested in the matter. In all Germany, look at the bishops, princes, noblemen, the inhabitants of town and country – how confidently they go on sleeping and snoring in their indifference to the question. They presume to think there is no need for action; the matter will adjust itself; there will always be pastors and preachers. But assuredly they deceive themselves if they think they are consulting their best interests in this affair; for they will, as the text says, become foolish and fail to recognize the will of God. Therefore they will some day have to experience what they do not now believe: in a few years after our day they will seek preachers and find none; they will have to hear rude, illiterate dolts who, lacking understanding of the Word of God, will, like all stupid Papists, preach the vile, offensive things of the Pope, about consecrated water and salt, about gray gowns, new monasteries and the like.

6. Cry, preach and admonish as we will, no one will hear; foreseeing which, Paul prophesies that they who observe not God's will, become unwise, foolish, and consequently waste the day of grace and neglect their salvation. Now, it is God's will we should sanctify his name, love and advance his Word, and so aid in building up his kingdom. When we fulfill his will in these things, he will regard our desires, providing us with daily bread and granting peace and happiness.

7. Now, it should be our chief concern to preserve to ourselves the Word and will of God. That would truly be wisdom, and redeeming the time. But failing therein, it must be with us as with the unwise and fools; we will have to hear the declaration: “Since you refuse to sanctify my name, to advance my kingdom and to do my will, neither will I provide you daily bread, nor forgive your sins, nor keep from temptation and deliver from evil.” God will then permit us to deplore the great calamities of the world – its turmoil and wickedness, the cause whereof the world attributes to the Gospel. But the punishment just mentioned must be visited upon them who will not recognize the will of God and submit to it. These, however, desire to justify themselves and are unwilling to receive censure for having conducted themselves unwisely, even foolishly.

8. So much for a general observation upon the expression “walking wisely and circumspectly”; so much upon unwise conduct in regard to matters of vital importance to the Church, which have to do with the office of the ministry and with God’s Word. Where the ministry and the Word of God are preserved, there will always be some among the masses to attend upon the preaching of the Word and to conform their lives to it. But when the Bible leaves the pulpit, little good will be accomplished, even though one here and there be able to read the Scriptures for themselves and imagine they have no need of the preached Word. Where will the untaught masses stand? Note how it has been with the poor people in our time who were misled by Munzer and Munster, and their prophets and factionists.

## **PUBLIC PREACHING OF THE WORD ENJOINED**

Then let everyone lend earnest effort to promote public preaching of the Word everywhere, and public attendance upon that preaching; and thus rightly to found and build up the Church. Let him also put on the wedding garment himself (mentioned in the Gospel for today); let him take care to be found an earnest advocate of the Word of God, uninfluenced by thoughts common to the secure spirit: “Oh, there are pastors and preachers enough for me. I can hear or read the Word when I please; have access to it any day. I must give first attention to bread-winning and like things. Let others look out for themselves.” Take care, my dear sir; you can easily fail by carelessness here and be found without the wedding garment, perhaps may die without it, unaware how you are being deceived. Whose fault will it be but your own since you would not hear Paul’s admonition to walk wisely and circumspectly?

9. We should make provision while the opportunity is at our doors, for, judging from the present course of the world, it will not long retain what it has. Everywhere men are diligently helping to hunt down ministers, or at least to so bring to bear upon them hunger and poverty, to so oppose them with secret fraud, as to drive them from the land. And little trouble and labor will be required to accomplish it. We shall only too soon be rid of our ministers and have their places amply supplied by deceivers. I would much rather suffer in hell with Judas the Betrayer than to bear the guilt of accomplishing one minister’s death or of being instrumental in offering place to one deceiver. For it would

not be so intolerable to suffer the anguish of the betrayer of Christ as to endure that of one who, by his sin in this respect, is responsible for the loss of countless souls.

## NECESSITY OF IMPROVING THE TIME

10. Paul goes on to elaborate his admonition by explaining what it is to walk circumspectly and wisely – to “*redeem the time, because the days are evil.*” In other words: Think not happy days are in store for you and you may defer duty till better times; better times will never be. The devil is always in the world to hinder your every effort to do good, and his opposition increases with time. The longer you tarry, the less your power to accomplish good; wasted time only makes matters worse. Then redeem the time; grasp your opportunities as best you can. Let no interest be so dear to you as the promotion of God’s kingdom and the serving of the public in every good and useful way possible, whatever befall yourself.

11. Christ in like manner says to the Jews: “*While ye have the light, believe on the light, that ye may become sons of light.*” John 12:36. And Paul, after quoting from Isaiah 49:8, adds: “*Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*” 2 Corinthians 6:2. So his counsel in our text means: Take heed you receive not the grace of God in vain. Or, neglect not the matter of your salvation; enjoy while you may the opportunity of furthering the kingdom of God, for the sake of your own and others’ salvation. Defer not the thing to another time, lest the opportunity escape you. Elsewhere ( Galatians 6:10) the apostle says, “As we have opportunity, let us work that which is good.” In other words: Act now, while you may. Your time passes with astonishing rapidity. Be not deceived, then, by the thought, “Oh, I can attend to the matter a year from now – two years – three.” That is simply foolish. It is an unwise conclusion of the thoughtless. Before they are aware, they have lost the salvation extended them. They defer to consider God’s will, putting it off for a season, until they shall have accomplished their own aims; then they have deferred too long.

12. The Lord comes to your door. You do not have to seek him. If you are grateful he tarries to speak with you. But if you let him pass by you will have to complain as did the bride in Song of Solomon 5:6: “I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone ... I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.” Think not you will find the Lord when he has once gone, though you traverse the world. But while he is near you may seek and find; as Isaiah says ( Isaiah 55:6), “Seek ye Jehovah while he may be found.” If through your neglect he pass by, all seeking then will be vain. For more than twenty years in my cloister I experienced the meaning of such disappointment. I sought God with great toil and with severe mortification of the body, fasting, watching, singing and praying. In this way I shamefully wasted my time and found not the Lord. The more I sought and the nearer I thought I was to him, the farther away I got. No, God does not permit us to find him so. He must first come and seek us where we are. We may not pursue and overtake him. That is not his will.

13. Then be careful to avail yourself of the present opportunity. Embrace it while he is near, and faithfully consider what he requires of you. To ascertain this, go to the Creed and the Ten Commandments. They will tell you. Regulate your life by them. Be helped by the Lord's Prayer. Begin with yourself; then pray for the Church. Let it be your desire that God's name be everywhere sanctified and that your life conform to his will. If you are faithful in these things, assuredly you will walk wisely; you will avoid sin and do good. For the study and practice of these precepts will leave you no opportunity to do evil. God's Word will soon teach you to sanctify his name, to extend his kingdom, to do your neighbor no injury in mind, body or estate.

14. Observe this is "redeeming the time." This is employing it well, while the golden days last in which we have remission from pain and sin. Not such remission as the Pope grants in his jubilees, wherein he deceives the world. Right here let us be careful not to cheat ourselves with the false idea that salvation cannot escape us. Let it not be with us as befell the children of Israel, of whom it is said in Psalms 95:11 and Hebrews 4:3 that because of their unbelief they entered not into the rest of God. They would not accept their opportunity in the forty years wherein he gave them his Word and showed them his wonders, daily admonishing them and calling to repentance and faith. They but tempted and provoked him the more. Hence another admonition was given the people of God and a certain day appointed: "*Today if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts.*" Hebrews 4:7. Every day with us is "today" and we are permitted to hear God's voice still imploring us not to waste the time.

15. Surely we ought supremely to thank God, as the latter part of our text enjoins, for the great blessing of his nearness to us. We have his presence in our homes. He is with us at our board, by our couch – anywhere we desire him. He offers us all assistance and grants all we may ask. So gracious a guest should indeed receive our high esteem. We ought to honor him while he is with us.

16. Well may we pray, as I have said. There is too much slumbering everywhere in Germany. We cannot perceive how it is possible to preserve the Gospel and fill the pulpits for ten years longer. To such extent does wickedness rage in the world that blindness and error must sweep it as before. And no one will be to blame but the stupid bishops and princes, and those of us who esteem not the Word of God.

## **INGRATITUDE WILL BE PUNISHED**

Alas, that I am compelled against my will to be a prophet of ill to Germany. Yet it is not I, but the prayer of my Lord and your Lord; for according to its teachings he will say: "*You neglected my Word. Unwilling to tolerate it, you persecuted and starved out its messengers. Therefore I will withhold your daily bread and give instead famine and war and murder, unto utter desolation; for you wish to have it so. Then when you cry for forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the evils come upon you, I will hear you as you heard my Word, my entreaties. I will leave you in your misfortunes as you left me and my Word.*"

17. In fact, no one for a moment thinks of how God has signally, richly and graciously blessed us; how we are in possession of actual paradise – yes, the entire kingdom of heaven – if we only recognized the fact: and yet we shamefully, ungratefully and unreasonably reject the kingdom; as if it were not enough for us to overstep the Ten Commandments in our disobedience, but must even trample under foot the mercy God offers in the Gospel. Then why should we be surprised if he send down wrath upon us? What else is he to do but fulfill our Gospel passage for today, which threatens every individual rejecter and persecutor of God's Son and his servants, by whom we are invited to the marriage – what else is God to do but send out a divine army of servants to arrest the career of such murderers and to terminate their existence? We are given a special illustration – an example to the world – in the instance of the fate of Jerusalem, and in fact of the entire Jewish nation. They sinned unceasingly against all God's commandments, and when he proclaimed grace and offered forgiveness of sins, they trampled upon his mercy. Should Christ not revenge himself when they shamed and mocked his precious blood?

18. Unto all the abominable sins mentioned, we must heap blasphemies; for when wrath and punishment come upon us we make outcry, complaining that the Gospel – or the new doctrine, as it is now called – is responsible. The Jews blame us Christians alone for the fact that they are scattered throughout the world. Their prayers day and night are directed against us, in blasphemies and reproaches inexpressible. Nevertheless, it was not the Christians who harassed and scattered them, but the heathenish Roman emperor. But whom other than themselves have the Jews to blame for their condition? for they would not tolerate Christ, when he brought them only help and boundless grace. Refusing to accept him whom God gave and in whom he promised all blessings, they necessarily lost their daily bread from God, except as they rebelliously extort it by usury and wickedness. They had also to suffer the loss of their national life, their priesthood and public worship, forgiveness of sins and redemption, and so remain eternally captive under the wrath and condemnation of God. Such is the just and inevitable punishment of the unwise – the foolish – who refused to recognize their opportunity when Christ was with them.

19. With this terrible example before our eyes, we are still unrepentant, pursuing the same course the Jews followed, not only in disobedience to the will of God, but in rejecting his grace. For that grace we should earnestly long and pray, striving to secure to our children after us baptism, the ministry and the sacrament, in their purity. In return for our perversity, it will eventually be with us as with the Jews and other ungrateful persecutors and rejecters.

20. Then let him who will receive advice and help, faithfully heed Paul's counsel and redeem the time, not sleeping away the blessed golden hour of grace; as Christ earnestly admonishes in the parable of the five foolish virgins. Matthew 25:13. The foolish virgins might have made their purchases in season, before the bridegroom's arrival; but failing to attend to the matter until time to meet the bridegroom, they missed both the market and the wedding.

21. The ancient poets and sages make use of a similar illustration at the expense of the cricket or grasshopper. As the fable runs, when winter came the grasshoppers, having nothing to eat, went to the ants and asked them to divide their gathered store. “What did you in the summer time that you gathered nothing?” asked the ants. “We sang,” the grasshoppers replied. “If you sang in the summer, you must dance for it in the winter,” was the response. Similarly should fools unwilling to learn the will of God be answered. Terrible and alarming is the wrath of God when with scorn and mockery he turns away a soul. In Proverbs 1:24 and 26 he threatens: *“Because I have called, and ye have refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man hath regarded .... I also will laugh in the day of your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh.”*

22. Some may ask what Paul means by adding to the phrase, “Redeeming the time,” the modifier, “Because the days are evil;” if we are to regard the present opportunity golden, why are the days evil?

## **EVIL DOCTRINES EVER OPPOSE THE CHRISTIAN**

23. I answer: The time is unquestionably good so long as the Gospel is sounded – is faithfully preached and received. At the same time, even today the world is filled with evils, factions, false theories and bad examples of every sort; much of this wickedness is inherent in ourselves. With these things the Christian must always contend; the devil pursues, and our own flesh discourages us and allures from recognition and observance of the divine will. If we strive not against it, we shall soon lose sight of God’s will, to our own injury, even while listening to the Gospel. For the devil’s strongest fury is exerted to befoul the world with fanaticism, and to draw from the pure doctrine of faith into that evil even them who possess the Gospel. Moreover, being still flesh and blood we are always selfsecure, unwilling to be led by the Spirit, and indolent and unresponsive in relation to the Word of God and to prayer. Again, in the outward walks of life, in temporal conditions, only obstacles and evils meet us everywhere, impeding our spiritual progress and impelling us to suppress the Gospel and to rend the Church.

24. Let no one, then, expect to enjoy an era of peace and pleasure here on earth. Although the present time is in itself good, and God bestows upon us the golden year of his Word and his grace, yet the devil is here with his factions and followers, and our own flesh supports him. He corrupts the blessed days of grace at every possible opportunity, and so oppresses Christians that they must contend against him with their utmost strength and vigilance if they would not, through the influence of evils and obstacles, be wrested from the Gospel they have received, and if they would persevere therein unto the end. Wherefore, we have the best reasons to adapt ourselves to the present time in the best possible way; to walk wisely and circumspectly, showing all faithfulness to the will of God; obeying it while we have opportunity – while still in possession of God’s Word, his grace and his Spirit. Being opposed and obstructed by the devil and our own flesh, we must, as Paul implies, be wise and careful; we must guard against following them. If we fail in this respect, it will not avail us to pretend we did not know our duty, or had not time to perform it and consequently could not cope with them. So, then, we are to

understand by “evil days” the allurements that lead us away from God’s Word and his will.

*“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess.”*

25. The apostle touches upon several evils strongly tending to waste of time and neglect of the golden opportunity. Especially is drunkenness one, for drink makes men particularly self-secure, reckless and disorderly. The evil was formerly common in Greece, and in Germany today are men who delight in being riotously drunk night and day. Such individuals are utterly lacking in the faithfulness and interest essential to following the will of God. They are unable, even in temporal affairs, to persistently apply themselves, much less to be opportune. Indeed, so beastly and swinish do they become, they lose all sense of either shame or honor; they have no modesty nor any human feeling. Alas, examples are before our eyes plainer and more numerous than we can depict.

26. Paul’s words of admonition, “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” are treated in the epistle passage for the fifth Sunday after Epiphany, where the text is similar.

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