

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

The Rev. Jonathan Gibson

April 27 2008

"The Paradoxical Life"

The Text" Ephesians 5: 15-20

15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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A pastor, known for his lengthy sermons, noticed a man get up and leave during the middle of his message. The man returned just before the conclusion of the service. Afterwards the pastor asked the man where he had gone.

"I went to get a haircut," was the reply.

"But," said the pastor, "why didn't you do that before the service?"

"Because," the gentleman said, "I didn't need one then."

Do not worry none of you will be here that long today. However I wanted to begin with the joke because it is an example of a paradox. What makes this joke funny is that while a sermon might at times seem so long that a man's hair could grow so that a haircut was needed, the punch line is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense. This could never really happen! And yet there is a truth to be gleaned from the joke for those who are preachers.

The Bible is replete with statements that are paradoxical. Listen to these words from Paul in 2nd Corinthians: 6:8-10:

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

These are seemingly contradictory statements are they not? How can someone be sorrowful, yet always rejoicing, have nothing and yet possess everything? The only way such paradoxes can be understood as true is when life is seen in light of the grace that is in Jesus. From a worldly perspective, Paul and his fellow apostles were perceived as imposters, anonymous, sorrowful and poor. And yet from the Christ-centred perspective things were very different for they could rejoice, be satisfied with their lives and so make many rich.

These paradoxes can only be discerned and perceived by those who trust in God as they live in a sinful world. And it is this dichotomy and contrast that Paul is conveying to us in these verses.

I have begun this morning's sermon by referring to paradoxes because the passage we will study now from Ephesians 5: 15-20 is paradoxical and so the title for this sermon is "The Paradoxical Life"

I want to show you the paradoxical nature of this passage in a general sense and then go on to look at three particular ways Paul holds together the tension of paradox.

Remember I said that a paradox is statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true. We see that here.

On the one hand the text says, Watch carefully how you live, that is, be alert and vigilant. Apply wisdom to redeem the time. That opportunity will never come again. The days are evil; opposition is great; be wise as serpents. Understand what the will of the Lord is. These words ring with a sense of urgency. They are like the words of a platoon leader addressing his unit just before they enter combat. The air is tense and your heart is beating fast and, even if you love battle, your hands are sweaty. "Watch your step; be smart; don't miss your opportunity; keep yourself lean for the battle!"

Then comes verses 18b–20: Be filled with the Spirit, and sing to each other—sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. And let your heart fill up with melody where nobody else can hear but God. And let the golden thread of all your songs be thanksgiving to your heavenly Father—thanksgiving for everything!

Now it sounds like the war is over! The tension and vigilance of conflict are gone. We're back home with the family. There's a fire in the fireplace and marshmallows on the skewers, and a spread out on the dining room table; and sweet music is in the air.

I want us to just meditate on this paradox of being a vigilant people at war and yet a thankful and singing people at peace. And even if we can't fully explain how this can be, my prayer is that the mere awareness of it will help you live with it, and perhaps even thrive in it.

This idea is something that it at the very heart of Jesus' teaching and is perhaps summarized most succinctly in John 16:33:

While you are in the world, you will have to suffer. But cheer up! I have defeated the world. (English Standard Version)

In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world. (The Message)

Here is the same tension presented to us by Jesus at the end of the Upper Room supper on Maundy Thursday. To say that while in the world they would have to suffer is an understatement, knowing what we do from the perspective of the cross. And yet Jesus was able to say this word about suffering because it was understood in light of the Resurrection, where the declaration that he had overcome the world would be endorsed.

It is this tension that all who have followed these original disciples have had to face and it is indeed this same paradox that Paul is addressing here in Ephesians 5:15-20.

Three Ways to Express This Tension

So let me try to take the overall paradox that I see between urgency in verses 15–18a and gratitude in verses 18b–20 and break it up into three parts—three ways of expressing the tension of these verses.

1. Expressing thanksgiving especially in adversity

2. Using the Mind but not neglecting the voice.
3. Patiently redeeming the time.

1. Expressing thanksgiving especially in adversity:

It is clear from what Paul writes here that the language is filled with urgency. The days are evil, there are many who live foolishly and yet the way we are to live is with an attitude of thanksgiving. In verse 20 we are told: "give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Notice the way Paul phrases this verse. Thanksgiving is to be the way we live our lives. The adverb "always" is to qualify the verb "give thanks". You will notice in verse fifteen Paul says that we are "to look carefully how we walk." How do we walk? We put one foot in front of another and as we do this repeatedly we propel ourselves forward. If we are not encumbered with knee or joint problems or paralysed, walking is something we take for granted. It is habitual, normal and something we do all the time. For the Christian, thanksgiving is to be as normal to how we live as is walking. Now notice please that Paul is as realistic as Jesus when it comes to his understanding of how hard it is to live in the world. Think back to the verses we considered from 2 Corinthians 6. He experienced great hardship in the world, but Paul's hardships did not define how he walked. His walk was influenced and governed by his faith in Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul does not say "give thanks for everything and always" full stop. Rather he says we give thanks to God the Father through Jesus Christ. So I want to ask the question: Why does he use the prepositions "to" the Father and "through" Jesus Christ?

He uses "to the Father" because for the follower of Jesus life is to be lived continually in the Father's presence. We are to cultivate an attentiveness to the Father's nearness. One of the ways we do this is through an attitude of thanksgiving.

If we recall what Paul wrote in chapter one, this will, I think, make more sense to us. We can be thankful to the Father because the Father has loved us from before the foundation of the world. And while we are in the world facing great challenges and difficulties; when we have our minds and hearts fixed on the Father, we recall that his intention for us is not our failure but our perfection. Remember Paul says in chapter 1 that we have been chosen to be holy and blameless before the Father. Therefore while there is much in life that is

profoundly perplexing and at times overwhelming, the follower of Jesus remembers whose we are and what the Father's plan is for us. As we are able to more fully cultivate a heart that is able to give thanks always and for everything, we do this mindful of the larger purpose God has for our lives, thus giving us a perspective on the present. It needs to be said that this does not mean that we always give thanks for our circumstances, rather we give thanks in our circumstances.

This is shaped by a view of life that admits here is my situation:

"This is what I am now facing and as I cultivate a thankful mind and heart to the Father may I gain keener insight for how in these circumstances I can claim afresh the purposes of the Father for me and so give thanks to the Father".

We are to give thanks to the Father through Jesus because as Christians we find our identity in Christ. When we suffer the Bible teaches that Jesus is suffering too. We are his and so we are joined to him. When we rejoice we rejoice with Jesus, and so giving thanks through Jesus implies that we so identify with Jesus and he with us that we are joined together. In Ephesians Paul says this of Jesus:

"when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

Here we see that Jesus is given the place of preeminence in the universe. He is above all powers and authority. In Ephesians we need to remember that the theme of spiritual authority is very important as we will study more fully in chapter 6. Remember that the church exists to witness to these authorities the manifold wisdom of God. These authorities are what Paul refers to as the principalities and powers which or malevolent forces at work inflicting hardship pain and even death. But says Paul Jesus is above them all and has authority over them. Not only does he say this about Jesus, but listen to what he says about the believer.

"God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2.6)

Do you see the connection? Just as Jesus was raised up, we have been too and we are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. This is a

staggering truth to consider. Paul is saying that as Christians we are seated with Jesus above all the other powers in the universe. So when Paul says that we are to give thanks to the Father through Jesus Christ, he is showing us the source of our thankfulness. It is not a thankfulness that has anything to do with the circumstances of our lives or the world. (Remember Paul is imprisoned when writing these words to us.) Rather our thankfulness has everything to do with where we are positioned in relation to our circumstances. We are seated with Christ and although we cannot avoid the challenges and difficulties of life, we can through Christ, over come them because we are seated already with Christ in the heavenly realms.

It is because Paul understood this truth so deeply that he was able to write in Romans 8:

...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Do you see how Paul is using the same kind of language here in speaking about principalities and powers? Do they affect our life? Absolutely, and this is why Paul speaks about life and death and things present and things to come. We do not know what life will hold. But Paul also is able to declare that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Why is this? It is because of what Paul says in Ephesians 1. Jesus is far above:

all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."

This is important for us to understand if we are to make sense of what Paul means when he says we are to give thanks through Christ. We do this because we so identify with Jesus and are joined to him that while we are living in this world we are at the same time united to Jesus who is superior to all authorities that would seek to destroy and undermine Jesus and us.

Therefore we can give thanks to the Father through Jesus Christ, especially in adversity because we know the Father's will for us and we know our position in Christ.

I have spent a lot of time on this first point because it is essential for us to understand how we are to be thankful in order to apply this word of encouragement and exhortation to our lives. I will be shorter with the second and third points so that you needn't leave for a haircut.

2. Using the Mind but not neglecting the voice.

In this passage Paul is very clear on the necessity of joining the mind with the voice, or we could say the intellect with the heart. Look again at verses 15-17.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Christian men and women should celebrate the gift we have given because we have the ability to think clearly and deeply about life. We are to love the Lord with our mind. This means that we want to encourage those people who have intellectual capability to use it to the glory of God. Christians are people who are to love learning because we want to better understand how to live wisely and well in the world. Paul indicates to us here that this is necessary because the days are evil. One of the ways we counter this evil is by living wisely as we understand the will of the Lord.

We are to be stewards of our minds. Notice Paul says that we are to make the best use of the time we have been given. Perhaps this challenges us to reflect on how we use our minds and how we feed our mind. What do we read and watch and listen to? For the Christian we are exhorted by the Apostle to be people who are not to waste our time in mindless entertainments but in the pursuit of that which enriches and enhances how we walk.

But not only are we to use our mind we are not to neglect the voice and so Paul says we are to "address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" We are to make melody to the Lord in our hearts. Our emotions, not just our minds, should be engaged. We should not merely engage in the study of God's world with the mind we should also be carried away by what we are learning. We should not for instance just analyze the message of the Bible, we should be swept up into song when we read it. We shouldn't be content to formulate a

theory of salvation, we should be filled with thanksgiving that we are saved.

My admonition this morning is this: Keep these two things alive and well in your life, the powers of analysis and the pleasures of exultation. Studying with your mind and celebrating with your voice.

If you are all cerebral with little emotion, don't brag about it. It's a weakness, not a strength. Strive to nurture your heart's capacity for joy in God, lest you be stunted forever and have a little cup of joy all through eternity.

And if you are all emotional with little bent for study and analysis, don't brag about it. It's a weakness, not a strength. Strive to nurture your mind's capacity for thinking and understanding the work of God.

Don't surrender the paradox. It stands in Scripture. And without it your celebration of thanksgiving will have exultation and yet be superficial or it may have intellectual depth and yet be lukewarm. Hold the paradox together and your heart may experience the deepest gratitude you've ever known because your mind has seen more of God's truth than it has ever known.

3. Patiently redeeming the time

As we live this way, holding in tension the use of the mind and voice and learning to give thanks, especially in adversity we will be living in a way whereby we are patiently redeeming the time.

I like what St. Jerome said about this when writing in the fourth century:

Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, has risen. Rise up from the sleep of the age. Walk cautiously and prudently. Cast off folly. Take hold of wisdom. In this way you will be able to avoid changing yourself constantly as you walk though the vicissitudes of the times. Rather you will find a unity within yourself even amid the diversity of the times.

Here is an insight worth considering with which to end our study this morning. To be people who are patiently redeeming the time will mean that there will be a consistency and a constancy about how we live our lives. To have a unity within ourselves is a wonderful gift that we are

granted as we live paradoxical lives of gratitude in times of adversity and using our minds while not neglecting our voices.