

Marking Time Well

(1 Corinthians 16)

This morning we come to the second of three sermons in our study of 1 Corinthians 16. Two weeks ago we looked at the first of three practical matters Paul addresses in the sixteenth chapter. Our theme then was the ‘practicality of how we use our money.’ This morning we have heard Paul write about the practicality of how we use our time and the practicality of how we cultivate relationships within the Family of God.

Today we will look at Paul’s understanding of how we use our time as followers of Jesus Christ. This observation by Charles Dickens introduces the subject well.

“Father Time is not always a hard parent, and, though he tarries for none of his children, he often lays his hand lightly upon those who have used him well; making them old men and women inexorably enough, but leaving their hearts and spirits young and in full vigour. With such people the gray head is but the impression of the old fellow’s hand in giving them his blessing, and every wrinkle but a notch in the quiet calendar of a well spent life.

Thousands of years before Dickens and hundreds of years before Paul, Moses said something similar when he prayed: “Seventy years are given to us! Some may even reach eighty. But even the best of these years are filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear, and we are gone. Teach us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom.”

The Bible teaches us that those who know how to use time well are wise.

While it is true that we often waste money, we can do the same with time. Time appears to be so plentiful that losing much of it can seem inconsequential. If we threw away our money as thoughtlessly as we can throw away our time, people would think us insane. Yet time is infinitely more precious than money because money can’t buy time. But you can minimize the loss and waste of time by disciplining yourself for the purpose of Godliness. If you suddenly realized that you had no more time, would you regret how you have spent your time in the past and how you spend it now? Conversely, the way you have used your time can be of comfort to you in your last hour.’ You may not be happy with some of the ways you used your time, but

won't you be pleased then for all the times of Spirit-filled living, for all occasions when you have obeyed Christ? Won't you be glad then for those parts of your life that you spent in the Scriptures, prayer, worship, evangelism, serving, living in the present? Like Paul we are to use our time for the purpose of becoming more like the One before whom we will one day have to give an account for how we spent our time. What great wisdom there is in living as the eighteenth century Christian leader Jonathan Edwards did. He was committed to using time well." I am resolved, that I will live so, as I shall wish I had done when I come to die." In other words, Edwards wanted to live each day so that when he came to die, he could look back and say I was faithful to God for the time he gave to me.

Are you resolved to live so as you wish you had done when you come to die? Are you someone who is creative in how you use the hours given to you, especially the hours that are outside of the time you need to spend at work? And do you use the hours given to you at work faithfully? Do you use your time in ways that are life-giving to you and others? Or if you are honest you may have to admit "You know, I have a tendency to waste time. I use it in ways that are not profitable.

The Christian is to take seriously that just as we are to be stewards of money, so too we are to be stewards of the time God have given to us. For it is those who have learned to make the most of their time whose hearts and spirits can still be young, even though their bodies have marked time over many decades.

In reading these verses from chapter 16, I am left with a sense that Paul's heart and spirit are young and full of vigour, even though his body was aging. As he says in 2 Corinthians, he lived with a chronic condition, which he refers to as "the thorn in the flesh.

Paul teaches us two things about how he used time. First off, he brought his use of time under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Secondly, he knew how to live in the present moment.

Paul used his time by bringing it under the Lordship of Jesus Christ:

At the heart of Paul's understanding of how time is to be spent, is the thought he expresses in verse 7: "I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend

some time with you, if the Lord permits.” Paul is saying to the Corinthians that it is his hope to spend some time with them when he has an opportunity to come back to Corinth. But there is a qualifier. “If the Lord permits.” As was the true with other areas of Paul’s life, he allowed the Lord Jesus Christ to be the Lord of his time as well.

Paul’s perspective on time is one that can help us in an a generation that is so governed by time. We are called to surrender are tendency to come under the tyranny of the clock so that we can all Jesus to be the Lord of our time. How do we do this? By more fully focusing on what we are engaged in the present.

Paul writes that it is his intention to pass through Macedonia and perhaps stay with the Corinthians for the winter. He is making tentative plans yes, but as verses 8 and 9 emphasize he is living in the present. Paul was someone who could take to heart Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount where the Lord says : “Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don’t get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.”

He is able to see how in the present God is using him in Ephesus. Look at what he writes in verses 8-9 “But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, 9 for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.”

Paul is spending his time in Ephesus well. Although there are those who oppose his proclamation there are others who are responding to the ministry he is facilitating by their conversions and the renouncing of ungodly ways of living. (If you want to read more about this have a look Acts 19).

When we cultivate an awareness that our time is in God’s hands then we can more fully live in the present. There is a freedom to be found when with David we really believe “You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.

Now I will be honest with you. I struggle in resisting the tryanny of the clock almost daily. I am often thinking about the number of hours there are in the day and all that needs to get done today, or by the latest next week. When this happens I become pre-occupied with what I am not doing, and therefore do not enjoy what I am doing

at the present moment. Notice that Paul is not ruled by what he has to do in the future. He has plans yes. At verses 5 and 6 he writes: "I will visit you after passing through Macedonia-for I intend to pass through Macedonia- and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go." But the future is conditional on the Lord's leading and so he says here "Perhaps I will stay with you."

As we more fully learn to live in the present as people who use our time as disciples of Jesus Christ we will then be better stewards of the time we have been given by God. Then with Jonathan Edwards we will be resolved to live so, as I shall wish I had done when I come to die."

What was it Dickens' said?

"Father Time is not always a hard parent, and, though he carries for none of his children, he often lays his hand lightly upon those who have used him well; making them old men and women inexorably enough, but leaving their hearts and spirits young and in full vigour. With such people the gray head is but the impression of the old fellow's hand in giving them his blessing, and every wrinkle but a notch in the quiet calendar of a well spent life.

May we learn from Paul, Edwards and Dickens so that we may learn us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom."