

SERMON

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

Making the Most of the Time

Ephesians 5:15-20

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Rev. Dr. Thomas P. Groome, III

Some thoughts on time from comedian Steven Wright:

- I Xeroxed my watch. Now I have time to spare.
- I took a course in speed waiting. Now I can wait an hour in only 10 minutes.
- When I turned 2, I was really anxious because I'd doubled my age in a year. I thought, "If this keeps up, by the time I'm 6 I'll be 90."
- I was going 70 miles an hour and got stopped by a cop who said, "Do you know the speed limit is 55 miles per hour?" "Yes, officer, but I wasn't going to be out that long"

How do bees tell the time? Why do some plants open and close their flowers at the same time each day? How do the monarch butterflies know to migrate from North America to Central America at precisely the same time each year? Every year, bears know when to hibernate. Every winter ducks fly south. Every day, without an alarm clock, swallows know to rise before dawn to catch the early worms.

Humans, too, apparently have some internal rhythms that are regular enough to be linked to the clock. Heart attacks and births occur most often between the hours of 4 a.m. and 6 a.m. Toothaches are calmest after the noon hour, and the most likely time to have an allergy attack is around 11 p.m. Body temperature, heart rate and blood pressure are all lower at night and higher during the day, as if controlled by a programmable meter.

It has been only in the last several years, however, that scientists, and more especially, the science specialists known as *chronobiologists*, have begun to explain these occurrences. (Chronobiology is the study of the effects of time and rhythmical phenomena on life processes.)

Researchers eventually discovered the parts of the anatomy and the chromosomes that account for these inner clocks and calendars. What they found was that this synchronization mainly takes place as light reaches the organisms. Some other factors, including temperature, food availability, humidity and, in some cases, even social contact also contribute to the synchronization, but light is nature's primary factor.

With all of that as background, consider the epistle reading for today, which opens with the words of verses 15-16: "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil."

Those familiar with NT Greek will know that the Greek word Paul used that's rendered in English as "time" in the NRSV is *kairos*, which usually means not clock time but a significant moment, like an unexpected opportunity or a critical turning point in one's life. (The NIV words verse 16 as "making the most of every opportunity.") There's a different word in Greek — *chronos* — that's normally used when clock or calendar time is intended. Thus, some may want

to argue that the introduction about biological clock time ought not to lead to a biblical text that speaks of *kairos*.

But Paul was speaking to Christians who lived in Ephesus, in the midst of a pagan culture. Because of that, the opportunities to tell others about the power of Jesus were limited, which is essentially what he meant by saying the days were “evil.” The neighbors of the Christians in Ephesus weren’t very open to hearing the gospel. So Paul advised the Ephesian Christians to make good use of what few opportunities to share Christ arose, because there weren’t a whole lot of them.

Our situation today is different. Some might argue that our culture is still pagan, but there’s no shortage of opportunities in our age to tell the gospel. There are TV networks devoted to just that. Famous sports figures give their Christian testimonies. Church attendance may be down overall, but lots of people still go to church and hear the gospel week after week.

So if Paul were writing today, he might have rethought the matter of *kairos* and told us instead to use our *chronos* wisely.

Yet what we now know about biological clocks gives us reason to consider that verses 15 and 16 might be better *attached* to the preceding verses, especially verses 8-14. With their discussion of light and darkness, plus a snippet of an early Christian hymn — “Sleeper, awake!” — those earlier verses mesh with Paul’s statement about time when viewed from the standpoint of chronology.

In verse 8, Paul says, “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light” When Paul said, “Live as children of light,” he could have been talking *about a kind of morality*, about keeping our spiritual eyes open in real time so that *God’s light can reach us*. God’s light lets our inner moral clock know that these are not the hours to be spiritually slumbering.

We need to consider *how the actual hours of our day affect our receptivity to God*. As we go through our day, are we more receptive to hear God at some hours of the day than at others? Are we more receptive at certain times on the calendar? The old hymn says, “I need thee every hour,” but in fact, we may be more ready to receive God at one hour than another.

The traditional advice to “start the day with God” just doesn’t fit in my case. Our dogs have a biological clock and they wake me at approximately the same time each morning. I let them out, I feed them and the cat. I have a cup of coffee, check my email and then I’m out the door to walk the dog. It’s not until I get to the church office that I can spend time in prayer and meditate.

Chronobiologists are also looking at the yearly cycle. They tell us, for example, that heart attacks are 33% more common in winter than in summer. We don’t really know what to do with that knowledge yet, but it’s likely to eventually have some bearing on maintaining heart health.

In short, chronobiology is teaching us that our inner world and our outer world are fundamentally connected through things as basic to life as the hour of the day and the time of the year. So it’s important to consider the spiritual implications of that.

If we would be people with healthy spiritual lives, let us each find the time of day — and even the times of the year — when we can be most receptive to God. The church sets Lent as a time for spiritual renewal, which coincides with the renewal of the earth in springtime. Is it possible we, too, are more able to look at our inner being during such times on the calendar? Is it perhaps possible that the Sabbath day rhythm and times of celebrating the Lord’s Supper can open the doors of our hearts wider simply because they’re linked to the calendar?

We should always live our days looking for those moments, those inexplicable opportunities when God’s will and God’s way intersect with our daily walks.

And they can happen anytime! A friend calls you out of the blue to give a good word. A child’s innocent joy pierces a long, hard day of struggle. A coworker takes a moment to lend a hand. God is always surprising us with perfect *kairos* timing.

Of course, we can commune with God at any time and should seek God daily. Paul says that we should give “thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything” (5:20). There are also times when our inclination is elsewhere but when we should pray nonetheless (see, for example, Mark 14:37-38). But chronobiology suggests that we may be better receivers of messages God sends us at certain times and in certain seasons.

So let us then, in real time, seek God in the most conducive hours of our days and times of our lives.

Sources:

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The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.

Ephesians 5:15-20

Throughout Ephesians we are encouraged to be mindful of the unfolding reality of God’s timing and purposes, revealed through Christ’s redemptive work and advanced by the Holy Spirit’s sustaining power. The result of this divine activity transforms the past, present and future course of our human condition. Once we were dead because of sin and trespasses, but now we are alive through Christ, created to proceed via a new way of life — all graciously prepared for us by God (see Ephesians 2:1-11 and 4:21-24). While such grace is sure and reliable, it must not be taken for granted. Thus, Ephesians advocates a life of vigilant gratitude in response to the goodness of God’s grace.

Children's Sermon

Show the children your watch, and ask them to tell you what time it is. Have them tell you how long the worship service has been going, and how long they think it will go until it is over. A long time? Point out that this is a special hour, one that is devoted each week to the worship of God. Say that the apostle Paul advised “making the most of the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16). Admit that we sometimes waste time and don’t “make the most” of it, but in this hour we want to do what pleases God. Have the children suggest some of the ways we can do this. Then share Paul’s advice: “Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves ... giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:18-20). Emphasize that singing and giving thanks are two of the most important ways we make the most of this hour. Singing helps us express our love for God, and giving thanks is how we express our gratitude for all of God’s gifts to us. Close by saying that singing and saying “Thank you, God” are never a waste of time!