

01/05/20

Walking Wisely in the New Year
Series: Creating & Strengthening Christian Community

Ephesians 5:15-21

Those of us who are on Cape Cod in January and February are **the core** of Brewster Baptist Church. That's no disrespect to the many wonderful people who spend the winter elsewhere. We love all of you who are watching or reading this somewhere warm, and many of us wish we could join you! When it comes to our physical bodies, strengthening **our core** helps us with any other form of exercise or sport. In a similar way, our hope for this winter in worship is to **strengthen our core** as a church by focusing on the theme "**Creating and Strengthening Community.**" In his book, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote: "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community.... Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.... Each by itself has profound perils and pitfalls. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and the one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation and despair."

This quote speaks to the importance for all of us to have time both **in solitude and in community**. As followers of Christ, we're to emulate our leader who regularly took time in solitude with God and who also lived life amid a community of men and women who supported, learned from and followed Him. The Apostle Paul and others in the early church went from place to place forming new communities of people who pledged loyalty to Jesus as King and who were committed to caring for one another like family. **Perhaps that's why so much of the New Testament details how Christians are to treat one another.** The phrase "one another" from the Greek word "**allelon**" (**ah-LAY-loan**) meaning "one another, each other; mutually, or reciprocally," **occurs 100 times in 94 verses** in the *New Testament*. **Approximately 59 of those occurrences are specific commands teaching us either how to or how not to relate to one another.** Obedience to those commands is crucial for us to grow into spiritual maturity and for the sake of forming and maintaining healthy, strong and truly Christian communities we call churches.

In worship over the next couple of months, we're going to learn about many of the "One Another" passages in the New Testament. We're going to be talking about things like: **Accept one another** (*Romans 15:7*). **Don't grumble among one another** (*John 6:43*). **Bear with and forgive one another** (*Colossians 3:13*). **Gently, patiently tolerate one another** (*Ephesians 4:2*). **Be of the same mind with one another** (*Romans 12:16, 15:5*). **Be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving to one another** (*Ephesians 4:32*).

We begin our series with words the Apostle Paul shared with the church at Ephesus in ***Ephesians 5:15-21 (ESV)***, "**Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time**, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, **but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and**

hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody **to the Lord** with your heart, **giving thanks always and for everything** to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.**"

"Look carefully then how you walk, **not as unwise but as wise**" (Ephesians 5:15). Have you ever walked into the corner of a table or fallen and injured yourself because you didn't look carefully where you were walking? Some of us have experienced this personally in life-altering ways and it's painful. Yoenis Céspedes an outfielder with the New York Mets was home at his ranch in Port St. Lucie, Florida last summer recovering from surgeries on both heels when he suffered a "violent fall" that left him with multiple right ankle fractures. He was injured when a wild boar was removed from a trap and "either charged toward Céspedes or startled him," and he stepped into a hole and badly fractured his ankle. The incident led the Mets to restructure Céspedes' contract for the upcoming 2020 season. Instead of the original \$29.5 million he was slated to make he's only guaranteed \$6 million. That was a costly misstep, but still not as bad as the people who have died because they were texting and not paying attention to where they were going.

"Look carefully then how you walk, **not as unwise but as wise.**" Some of us have been told at one point or another to, "Wise up!" King Solomon was considered very wise. The *Book of Proverbs* is attributed to him. *Proverbs 1:2* tells us the book is, "For learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity." Yet in his life, Solomon often failed to heed the words that are in *Proverbs*. It's also true as *Proverbs 1:7* declares, "fools despise wisdom and instruction." We don't want to be foolish; we want to be wise. *Proverbs 1:26-31* warns us there's a time when it's too late to be spared the consequences of unwise choices and decisions and calamity, panic, distress, and anguish **will come** upon us. We hope and pray this doesn't happen to us this year. *Proverbs 4:7-8* urges us, "**The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight. Prize her highly and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.**" Who is someone you consider wise? What is it about her or his life, character, speech, or behavior that causes you to believe s/he is wise?

Paul urges the church to **walk carefully, live wisely** and "**be filled with the Spirit,**" and **then he tells them how they are to worship together** (*Ephesians 5:19*), "**addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord** with your heart." **This tells us there was musical variety in the first century church. The members were encouraged to sing different kinds of songs as part of their worship together.** In that sense, the way we're worshipping at the 10:00 service is like what the Christians did at Ephesus. Worship is a key aspect of being in community together. According to *Mark's Gospel 1:21, 39; 3:1*, attending worship in a synagogue was part of the rhythm of Jesus' life.

It's almost as if Paul anticipated that people might have different tastes and preferences when it came to psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, so he follows up by telling them they are to be "**submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.**" Part of being a Christian is humbly considering the needs of others. It's thinking about what's best for someone else and the group as a whole and not just "What I want, what I like, and what I'm used to." As Paul said famously in *1 Corinthians 13*, love "does not insist on its own way."

Amid all that is taking place, Paul tells the Ephesians they're to be (*Ephesians 5:20*), "giving thanks **always** and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." As you begin a New Year, what are thankful for? What are you afraid of? What are you praying about? What do you need to release and let go of and leave in the past? What are you resolving to do?

American Author and Poet, **Ella Wheeler Wilcox** (November 5, 1850 – October 30, 1919) wrote a poem called "**Resolve**" about ending the old year and beginning the new one.

"As the dead year is clasped by a dead December,
So let your dead sins with your dead days lie.
A new life is yours, and a new hope. Remember,
We build our own ladders to climb to the sky.
Stand out in the sunlight of Promise, **forgetting**
Whatever the Past held of sorrow or wrong.
We waste half our strength in a useless regretting;
We sit by old tombs in the dark too long.

Have you missed in your aim? Well, the mark is still shining.
Did you faint in the race? Well, take breath for the next.
Did the clouds drive you back? But see yonder their lining.
Were you tempted and fell? Let it serve for a text.
As each year hurries by let it join that procession
Of skeleton shapes that march down to the Past,
While you take your place in the line of Progression,
With your eyes on the heavens, your face to the blast.

I tell you the future can hold no terrors
For any sad soul while the stars revolve,
If he will stand firm on the grave of his errors,
And instead of regretting, resolve, resolve.
It is never too late to begin rebuilding,
Though all into ruins your life seems hurled,
For see how the light of the New Year is gilding
The wan, worn face of the bruised old world."¹

¹ Poetical works of Ella Wheeler Wilcox. by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Edinburgh : W. P. Nimmo, Hay, & Mitchell, 1917.

On New Year's Day, The Dalai Lama wrote, "Time is always moving on. Nothing can stop it. **The question is whether we use our time well or not.** We can't do anything about the past, but **what happens in the future depends on what we do now.** We can create a happier future by remembering that in being human we are all the same." Every single person in every country on the face of the earth is made in the image of God.

Did any of you make any New Year's resolutions? When it comes to New Year's resolutions and "good intentions," we know that the phrase "good intentions" can have a negative connotation. We all know which road is paved with those. **But what if the road to life, wisdom, and a strong community is paved with good intentions? Robust, grace-filled, firmly-rooted-in-Jesus intentions. We can resolve and intend to take some time with God in 2020 both individually and in worship together as a faith community.** Henri Nouwen wrote, "We do not take the spiritual life seriously **if we do not set aside some time to be with God and listen to him.** We may have to write it in black and white in our daily calendar so that nobody else can take away this period of time. Then we will be able to say to our friends, neighbors, students, customers, clients, or patients, 'I'm sorry, but I've already made an appointment at that time and it can't be changed.'"

If we're going to strengthen our spiritual core, we need a clear belief that life with God—every moment of life—is better than life without God. Pause and compare the days you've forgotten God and the days you've started and stayed with God; compare the days when you think it's all up to you, and the days you remember that as followers of Christ we're members of one another and called to submit to one another and help one another. The latter is the life we want. May God help us to walk wisely in the New Year.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Who is someone you consider wise? What is it about her or his life, character, speech, or behavior that causes you to believe s/he is wise?
2. On a scale of 1-10, how effective would you say you are at time management? What are some things you do to make the best use of time (*Ephesians 5:16*)? What adjustments could you make in the New Year to help you use time more wisely and productively?
3. What is your understanding of what Paul means when he says (*Ephesians 5:18*), "be filled with the Spirit." Why does Paul contrast drunkenness with being filled with the Spirit? What different behavior and actions are produced by each?
4. Paul describes worship in which attenders are (*Ephesians 5:19*), "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." What does that tell us about the variety of music present in first century Christian worship?
5. As you begin a New Year, what are you thankful for? Why does Paul encourage us to be (*Ephesians 5:20*), "giving thanks **always** and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

6. What does "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ," look like in practice in the church and in our families and relationships? How might it be related to humility and not insisting on getting our own way?