

August 16, 2009

Proverbs 4: 20-27 My children, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; for they are life to those who find them and health to a person's whole body. Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet, and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

Ephesians 5 : 15 –20 Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Walking and Talking

Since I've been in San Diego, I've gotten lost a few times. I shouldn't say "lost." I always knew where I was and where I was trying to get. I just haven't always known how to get from the one place to the other!

The roads here go around curves. They stop before they get to the cross street I'm looking for. All of the sudden there's a canyon, or a hill, or a freeway that blocks my way.

I know that the roads in Orange County do the same types of things, but I know my way around there. I've lived there for 37 years and I know how to get just about everywhere, most places two or three different ways.

Here, I am just beginning to figure things out. It will take me a while to learn where people live, where certain stores are, where to go to the movies and the bank. After a while I will be able to go where I need to and where I want to without giving it a second thought.

I am not wise about the streets of San Diego yet. I wander off the path. I make wrong turns and false starts.

My path is not firm or level, as Proverbs talks about. I swerve to the right and to the left.

I know where I want to go, but I just can't get there, at least not in a way that uses my time wisely.

Aren't our lives often like that?

Isn't it true that we know where we want to go, but we just don't know how to get there? We know we want to do God's will, but we just don't understand what that means, what we should do, which way we should go when we're faced with a decision?

In our walk with God, we are often lost on streets that curve or end abruptly, interrupted by unexpected fences and dead ends, otherwise known as illness, inability, family emergencies, lay-offs, etc. All kinds of things can happen that sidetrack us, that stop us from doing what we had planned to do, that take our focus off what we were doing and where we were going.

Our passage from Ephesians today tells us to be careful how we live, to understand the will of God. We might know how to be careful, but understanding the will of God can be tricky.

I know people who pray over every decision they have to make. They ask God for directions at every intersection they come to, every choice they have. This is a good thing to do! But it's not always clear what God's answer is.

I have a friend who recently moved to the Midwest. Before he left, he asked "How can I know that this move is God's will? How can I know that I'm doing the right thing?"

I often ask the same question when I'm about to do something, and I wouldn't be surprised if you do, too. How **do** we know that what we are about to do is what God wants us to do? It's not like a big sign is lowered down from heaven that points in one direction or the other, or says Yes or No, don't do that!

Just like when I'm driving around in San Diego and I come to an intersection. There is no sign ---usually--- that says "This way to Home Depot" or "turn right to get where you want to go."

God doesn't make it that obvious and clear very often. In fact, it sometimes seems like there are no clear directions in life.

When I was young and trying to decide what I wanted to be when I grew up, it seemed like there were a lot of choices and that there were at least two or three that were interesting, that would be a good fit for me.

In the end, I guess, I have done most of them. And yet it turns out that those other careers were just detours on the way to ministry. I guess you might say that I took the scenic route!

And yet, I wouldn't have gotten where I am without those detours! Or actually, I would've gotten here, but I wouldn't have been the same when I arrived.

Because finding the will of God is about the journey, not the destination.

When Paul tells us to understand what the will of God is, I don't think he means that there is only one particular, specific choice. He doesn't mean that if you make a wrong decision, a wrong turn, then you've messed up and gotten unforgivably, irrevocably lost. No, there's always another chance, another turn to make, another way of getting to your destination.

Right after Paul says to understand the will of God, he tells us not to get drunk on wine. This must have been a problem for the Christians in Ephesus. It's a problem for some of us.

Why do people get drunk? They want to feel something. Or stop feeling something. Or just relax and have a good time. They have a need that is going unmet.

Paul is directing us away from the desires of our bodies and telling us to understand the will of God. And toward a better way to find what we need to be happy, to live a better life.

Paul continues by telling us what we should do instead of getting drunk!

He tells us to be filled with the Spirit!

And to praise and worship God in song, not just together on Sundays and not just out loud, but in our hearts!

And that we should thank God at all times and for everything.

Joyfully. Constantly.

But let's stop for a moment.

Explaining this passage this way can sound like we are required to be happy and praising God for everything all the time.

And this gets us dangerously close to saying "Good Christians should" never be sad, never be upset, never be angry

"Good Christians should" always be happy, cheerful, brave, satisfied with the status quo.

"Good Christians should" blah blah blah.....

And I don't think that's what Paul means at all.

Even Paul didn't constantly keep a song in his heart. He had some kind of problem, something he called a "thorn in the flesh."

We don't know exactly what he meant by this. It has been speculated that he was referring to poor eyesight or some kind of constant pain or even a constant temptation that he faced. But we don't know for sure.

He didn't always thank God for this problem. He tells us in other writings that he asked God to take it away three times before he accepted that he would have to live with it. Eventually he was able to be grateful for it because it kept him grounded and humble. But it was a struggle.

So Paul knew that we struggle to get to such a place of praise and song and gratitude. He was not unrealistic!

He knew that we need help to get to the point where we can sing hymns of praise and give thanks to God all the time. So he tells us, "Be filled with the Spirit!"

And how do we do that?

God, in infinite grace, has given us the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit. When we are baptized, we acknowledge that gift, we accept it. But there's a funny thing about the Spirit. It waits for us to know it's there. It doesn't force its way onto us, it doesn't control us like a puppet. It's there, available, all the time, but a lot of the time we ignore it.

Or maybe I shouldn't say we ignore it, but we just don't listen to it.

Instead of being filled up with the Spirit, we push it down somewhere inside, down underneath all of our usual ways of doing things, off to the side where we can just work around it, or we make it small enough that we just can't see it any more.

So how can we find the Holy Spirit that is still there inside of us, around us, with us?

How can we let it grow bigger until it fills us up? Overflow right out of us?

I've mentioned spiritual practices before. Well, here they are again!

When we spend time in spiritual practices, we become more aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We open our eyes and realize that God the Holy Spirit is with us and among us and within us when we

Spend time in worship and devotions

Take time to pray

Read the Bible and other books that help us to understand more about God

When we partake of communion

When we spend time serving God and serving others.

So-----how's your Holy Spirit level? Is your spiritual tank empty, half-full, topped off? If you've been driving around in life like I have around San Diego, not sure how to get where you're going, maybe your spiritual tank is getting a little empty.

The only way to get through the journey of life with a full tank, filled with the Holy Spirit, is to spend time filling up! You need to stop at the spiritual gas station on a regular basis!

Spend time with God, getting to know God, working for the Kingdom of God, and be filled with the Holy Spirit!

And THEN!

Filled with the Holy Spirit, you will understand what the will of God is for you! And the will of God is not that you will never be confused about how to get where you're going. The will of God is that you will continue to travel on the journey, keeping your eyes on the goal of being with God, of enjoying the trip with all its twists and turns and unexpected detours.

And you will understand that there is more than one way to get where you're going. Wrong turns may cost you time. Then again, they may save you time, or they may help you learn something.

God created us for companionship, for relationship, for loving, not to direct our every step, but to be with us each step of the way. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we travel in joy and praise and thanksgiving, singing songs and hymns with our voices and in our hearts, knowing that God is with us every minute of our journeys. And it will be as if our paths are firm and level, and our feet never stray to the right or to the left, because our destination is always with us.

Amen.