

Ephesians 5:15-21¹

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.*

This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between the verse range listed above and the notes given below.

E. Live in Wisdom ([5:15-6:9](#))

1. Admonition ([5:15-21](#))

¹⁵So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. ¹⁶Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. ¹⁷Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do. ¹⁸Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, ¹⁹singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. ²⁰And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹And further, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Notes

[5:16](#)

Make the most of every opportunity.—This is a good rendering of “redeeming the time.” It means buying up or taking full advantage of any opportunity.

[5:19](#)

making music to the Lord in your hearts.—The NLT combines “singing and psalming” into “making music,” which summarizes the sense well.

[5:20](#)

give thanks for everything.—This could be translated either as “give thanks for all humanity” or “give thanks for all things.” NLT opted for the latter, which is preferable, because the context implies more than giving thanks for or on behalf of all people. Certainly, the parallel passage in [Col 3:17](#) indicates this.

[5:21](#)

out of reverence for Christ.—This is true to the literal “in the fear of Christ.” The word “fear” has a broad range of meaning—from absolute terror to respect. Barth (1974:608-609, 662-668) thinks that “reverence” is not strong enough and suggests that “fear” is more suitable as long as it is exercised in the context of love. Both the noun and verb occur frequently. In the NT there are only five times where “fear” is followed by one of the persons of the Godhead as an objective genitive ([5:21](#); [Acts 9:31](#); [Rom 3:18](#); [2 Cor 5:11](#); [7:1](#)). In all these examples the softer term “respect” is not adequate. Rather the stronger sense of “awe” and “reverence” is more suitable. Hence, here it has the sense of reverential fear or respect.

1. Philip W. Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary – Volume 16: Ephesians-2 Thessalonians, Philemon*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 106-110.

Commentary

This is the last of five sections set forth by the use of *peripateō* [^{TG}<G4043>, ^{ZG}4344] (“walk”; [4:1](#), [17](#); [5:1-2](#), [7-8](#), [15](#)) introduced by the inferential conjunction *oun* [^{TG}<G3767>, ^{ZG}4036] (therefore). On the basis of the doctrinal foundation laid out in [chapters 1-3](#), Paul exhorted believers to walk in unity ([4:1-16](#)), holiness ([4:17-32](#)), love ([5:1-6](#)), and light ([5:7-14](#)), and now finally he exhorts them to walk in wisdom ([5:15-6:9](#)). This last section can be broadly subdivided: the admonition ([5:15-21](#)) and the application ([5:22-6:9](#)).

Believers are exhorted to conduct their lives with great care, not as unwise but as wise. It is easy to become entrenched in habits and patterns and fail to give much thought to one’s daily existence and activity. As mentioned in [1:8](#), wisdom is a combination of theoretical and practical knowledge, which results in skillful living ([Exod 35:31](#), [35](#); [Prov 4:11](#)); true wisdom is apparent in those who fear the Lord ([Prov 9:10](#)). True wisdom is insight into the true nature of things, and this can only come from God. The unwise person lives as one who despises or has no insight into God’s plan. The evidence of true wisdom is spelled out concretely in [5:16](#)—namely, by making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil, controlled by the god of this age ([2:2](#)) who opposes God and his Kingdom and works to prevent opportunities for the declaration of God’s gospel and purposes. The redeemed of all ages have experienced this evil ([Ps 49](#)). Throughout the relentless warfare between the God of heaven and the god of this age, believers are not to be intimidated but to take advantage of every opportunity to live a life that pleases the Lord.

In addition to the injunction to walk wisely by making the most of every opportunity ([5:15-16](#)), Paul encouraged the believers to have a proper perspective that also will enable them to live a life that will please the Lord ([5:17-21](#)). Negatively, he exhorted them not to become thoughtless, and positively, he enjoined them to understand the Lord’s will ([5:17](#)). A person who is “thoughtless” is one who thinks carelessly and as a result lacks understanding or discernment in practical living. The positive exhortation is to understand what the will of the Lord is. The word “Lord” occurs 26 times in Ephesians, and it always has reference to Christ and not to God; thus, believers are to understand the will of their Lord, Christ. This fits well with the context, for [5:10](#) states that believers are to walk in the manner of approving what is pleasing to the Lord Jesus Christ. By understanding the will of the Lord, they will be wise not foolish, following the will of the flesh ([2:3](#)), as they did in their unregenerate days.

In [5:18-21](#) Paul sheds light on how better to understand the Lord’s will. He gives the usual negative command and then the positive one ([5:18](#)). In the negative sense, he tells believers not to be drunk with wine because this will ruin their lives, and this accordingly would correspond to unwise or foolish conduct. He does not forbid the drinking of wine but forbids excess, which leads to wastefulness and ruin. Such behavior does not exhibit the necessary wisdom needed to take full advantage of every opportunity ([5:15-16](#)). Conversely, Paul’s positive command is to be filled by the Spirit. The contrast is not between the wine and the Spirit but between the two resulting behaviors. This is expressed by the two verbs: being drunk with wine, which leads to ruination, and being filled by the Spirit, which leads to joy in fellowship and obedience to the commands of the Lord. Some commentators think that “spirit” refers to the human spirit (Abbott 1897:161-162; Westcott 1906:81), but they have difficulty explaining the nature of the filling. Ultimately, they relate the human spirit with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is better to view “spirit” as referring directly to the Holy Spirit, for this is consistent with its usage in Ephesians (Eadie 1883:398; Lincoln 1990:343-345; Best 1998:508; O’Brien 1999:391-393). In its grammatical usage in this passage, the Holy Spirit is the means by which believers are filled. The content of the filling is not specifically mentioned in the present verse but most likely refers to the fullness of the moral excellence and power of God mentioned in [1:23](#). Similarly, in [3:19](#) Paul prays that believers would be filled up to all the fullness of God, again pertaining to God’s moral excellence and power and experiencing the love of Christ. Also, the preceding verse signifies that we are to understand the will of the Lord, this being a reference to Christ. Hence, the Holy Spirit is the means by which believers are filled with Christ and discover his will. This concept corresponds well with the parallel

passage in [Colossians 3:16](#), where Paul states “Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.”

In comparing “drunk with wine” and “filled by the Spirit,” two observations can be made. Persons controlled by wine are no longer in control of their actions, as is demonstrated by their inability, for instance, to walk a straight line. Neither do those who are filled by the Spirit control their actions as they relinquish their will to the Lord. It is interesting to note that, at times, this produces unusual results, as in the case of the believers at Pentecost ([Acts 2:4, 13, 15](#)). The present imperative probably indicates the repeated action of filling by the Spirit. The imperative mood places the responsibility on believers, and the passive voice suggests that believers cannot fill themselves. Thus, believers are instructed to be filled repeatedly by the Holy Spirit wherever they are or amid whatever they are doing. This pattern of behavior is not limited to church services, as some suggest. In fact, there are four ministries of the Spirit at the time of and subsequent to conversion. There is the sealing ministry of the Spirit ([1:13; 4:30; 2 Cor 1:22](#)), which serves as a mark of identification or ownership indicating that believers belong to God. Then there is the indwelling ministry of the Spirit, which is enjoyed by every believer ([Rom 8:9-11; 1 Cor 2:12; 6:19; 2 Cor 5:5; Gal 4:6](#); cf. [John 14:17; 1 John 3:24; 4:13](#)) and is the source of God’s presence and power for the believer. Third, in [1 Corinthians 12:13](#), believers are baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (cf. also [Acts 1:5; 11:16](#))—that is, they are identified with one body of believers in Christ. Fourth, as indicated in the present verse, they are to be filled by the Spirit. The injunction to “follow the Spirit” ([Rom 8:4](#); see also [Gal 5:16-18](#)) seems to be parallel to being filled by the Spirit, for those who follow the Spirit do not fulfill the desires of the flesh but rather put to death the deeds of the flesh ([Rom 8:13-16](#)). Consequently, following the Spirit or being filled by the Spirit allows the Spirit of God to direct and empower believers to live lives pleasing to God and to do his will. These first three ministries of the Spirit—sealing, indwelling, and baptism—are bestowed on every believer at the time of salvation. There are no injunctions in connection with these ministries because all are an integral part of the gift of salvation. The imperative “be filled with” the Spirit, expressed in the present imperative, indicates that this is not an automatic bestowment at the time of salvation but an injunction for every believer to follow continually. The filling with the Spirit includes more than the Spirit’s indwelling—it is his activity realized in and through us. With the indwelling, each Christian has all of the Spirit, but the command to be filled with the Spirit enables the Spirit to have all of the believer. Being filled with wisdom is an impersonal concept, whereas being filled with the Spirit adds God’s personal presence, influence, and enablement to walk wisely, thus pleasing the Lord. The wise walk, therefore, is one that is characterized by the Holy Spirit’s control.

Paul then related four resultant characteristics of those filled with the Spirit ([5:19-21](#)). The characteristics are delineated by four participles of result (Lincoln 1990:345; Schnackenburg 1991:237; O’Brien 1999:387-388), all of which are dependent on the imperative “be filled with the Spirit” in [5:18](#). The first is communication with one another by means of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs ([5:19a](#)). Such psalms were most likely from the Old Testament, and the singing was accompanied by a stringed instrument. The hymns were probably songs of praise to God. The spiritual songs sung by believers resulted from being filled by the Holy Spirit rather than generated by wine. In [1 Corinthians 14:26](#), when the church assembled, believers were to have, among other things, a psalm. Singing had been important in the worship of Israel, and it continued to be important in the early church and the church throughout history. However, there is nothing in the text to suggest that singing praises to God is limited just to the time when believers are assembled. If one is filled by the Spirit, songs of praise to God will be a natural result anywhere and at anytime.

The second resultant characteristic of being filled with the Spirit is found in “making music to the Lord in your hearts.” As mentioned in the notes (see [5:19](#)), “making music” is a good translation of the Greek “singing and psalming.” Clearly, singing should not be just verbalization but should involve the heart, where the Holy Spirit resides ([Rom 8:9](#)). The following qualifying phrase indicates that making music occurs within the heart directed to the Lord ([5:19b](#)). Music is one means by which believers minister to each other and worship the Lord.

The third resultant characteristic is giving thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ ([5:20](#)). Believers filled with the Spirit will never cease to be thankful for their salvation and the provision of every spiritual blessing. Furthermore, the Spirit-filled believer will give thanks for all that they encounter on life’s journey. It should be noted that thanksgiving is directed to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Once again, this is in keeping with other parts of Ephesians, which mention the three persons of the Trinity (cf. [1:4-14](#), [17](#); [2:18](#), [22](#); [3:4-5](#), [14-17](#); [4:4-6](#); [5:18-20](#)).

The final resultant characteristic is submission to one another ([5:21](#)). The verb *hupotassomai* [^{TG} <G5293>/A, ^{ZG} 5718] is a part of a word group built on the Greek root *tag-*, signifying order or arrangement (see [1 Cor 15:23](#)), and with the prepositional prefix of *hupo* [^{TG} <G5259>, ^{ZG} 5679] the word literally means “to order oneself under a leader,” hence, “to be subject” or “to submit.” With regards to its form, the participle is rendered by some as in the middle voice—“submitting or subjecting yourselves” (KJV, ASV, NIV), while others render it as a passive “be subject” (RSV, NASB, JB, NJB, NRSV). There is not much difference between the middle and passive. The passive could connote that the subject has no control of the action, like a drunken person controlled by wine. The middle expresses the idea of cooperation, where the subject acts as a free agent. The latter is more in keeping with the context, for all four previous participles (communicating, singing, psalming [[5:19](#)], thanking [[5:20](#)]) are active, indicating that the subject is taking action under the guidance and control of the Holy Spirit. Thus, when believers are filled with the Holy Spirit the result will be mutual submission to one another. Whereas unbelievers prize individualism and independence, which lead to selfishness, believers are to love one another ([John 13:34-35](#)), prefer one another by showing honor ([Rom 12:10](#)), and count others better than themselves ([Phil 2:3](#)). Although mutual submission is accomplished by means of the filling by the Holy Spirit, how is this practiced? And how does one know when or in what areas to submit? Fortunately, the next section ([5:22-6:9](#)) sheds a great deal of light on the practice of submission. There are those who submit (wives, children, slaves), and there are those to whom they submit (husbands, fathers, masters). In brief, it will be seen that submission involves the willingness to submit to those who have authority, whether it be in the home, in the church, or in society. One thing is clear. Submission should not be taken lightly, because it is to be done out of fear of Christ. Though the range of meaning for “fear” is anywhere from absolute terror to one of respect, in this context it connotes reverential fear or reverential respect. Thus the NLT’s rendering “out of reverence for Christ” captures the idea well. In conclusion, [5:21](#) serves as a guideline for believers to be filled by the Spirit and to submit to one another out of fear of Christ. In the following verses, Paul becomes more specific regarding the practical outworking of submission.

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Ephesians 5:15-21²

5:15. "See" (*blepete*) is another way of saying "watch out" or "take heed" or "be very careful." The old term "circumspectly" (literally "looking around") contains the idea of walking "strictly."

5:16. The present participle in this verse is in the middle voice and refers to purchasing for one's self or for one's personal benefit on a continuous basis. "The days are *evil*" (*ponēros*) speaks of evil "in active opposition to that which is good." If Christians are not careful, the evil nature of this age will rob them of the opportunities to do God's will.

5:17. Doing God's will cannot become a reality in a person's life unless that person understands what God's will is. Actually, "be ye not unwise" in this verse comes from another present imperative prohibition, so it literally means "stop becoming those who are foolish."

5:18. Above all else, that which makes the Christian life successful and pleasing to God is living in the power of the Holy Spirit. Quoting [Proverbs 23:30](#), Paul warned against the folly of indulging in wine. Bacchus, the wine god, was one of the "gods" worshiped by pagans. Therefore, drunkenness was a normal part of pagan life. Apparently some of the Gentile Christians continued to follow their former practice, even though to them Bacchus was no longer a "god." The command comes from another present imperative prohibition, and it could be translated "stop being drunk with wine." Drunkenness only leads to "excess" or debauchery.

Instead of being filled physically, Paul encouraged Christians to be filled spiritually. The command here is from a present passive imperative verb, literally, "be being filled with the Spirit"; it is not optional. It is passive, denoting that God has to accomplish it. Thirdly, it is present, meaning it is an ongoing process.

5:19. This verse gives some excellent advice about staying full of the Holy Spirit. A person does so by worshiping God. Paul here mentioned only two of the many ways to worship God. We worship God through singing psalms set to music, through hymns which are songs of praise to God, and through spiritual songs. It is difficult to know exactly what is meant by this last type. Some Bible scholars think it refers to songs of testimony which are based upon spiritual experiences, while others think it refers to singing in other tongues (cf. [1 Corinthians 14:15](#)). Our worship in song certainly should contain a balance among these three types of singing.

5:20. Believers also worship God by constant thanksgiving. The Greek term from which we get the word *thanksgiving* comes from the word that translates into English as *eucharist* (*eucharisteō*), a term for the Communion service.

5:21. In the Greek language this important section of Ephesians begins with the statement, "submitting yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ" or "out of regard for His will and His glory." Paul reveals the most conspicuous of areas in which Christians should submit to one another. Marriage, family, and work are three areas in life where a person needs to have a peaceful relationship.

The structure of the entire passage from [5:21 through 6:9](#) stems from the participle *hupotassomenoi* which begins [verse 21](#), occupying the emphatic position. Because it is a present participle it refers to an activity that must be continuous. Because it is middle voice (the middle and passive voices have

2. Thoralf Gilbrant, ed., *The Complete Biblical Library – Galatians-Philemon*, (Springfield, IL: World Library Press, Inc., 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 155-157.

identical endings in present tense verb forms) it indicates it must be voluntary. In [Colossians 3:18](#) Paul used the verb form of the word, but the same participle occurs in [Titus 2:5](#), and also [1 Peter 3:1](#), [5](#). In all these instances the middle voice is used, showing the necessity of voluntary submission.