

The Wise Investment of Your Life

Ephesians 5:8-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ August 30, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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⁸For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— ⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:8-20, NRSV)

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If you were here last week you remember that in the previous section of Ephesians Paul used the metaphor of new clothes to remind us that as Christians we are to be clothed in a whole new way of living. With God's help we are to put on a new life, a life that looks like Christ. In this next passage Paul switches metaphors. **“For once you were darkness,” he writes, “but now in the Lord you are light.”** It's a different metaphor, but it makes the same point. Once we begin to follow Jesus our lives are bound to change. Christians are supposed to live differently than the rest of the world, certainly differently than the ways we lived before we came to know Christ.

You see, the message of the Christian Gospel is not a message meant simply to *inform* us. It's meant to *transform* us! In fact, I believe the message I have to share with you this morning, if you receive it in faith, has the power to change your life. That's true every Sunday, no matter who is preaching, as long as the sermon is faithful to the message we have been given in scripture.

Do you believe that? Did you come to worship this morning expecting to encounter God's Word, to hear the Living Christ speak directly to you in a personal way, and then to walk out of here a different person, or at least on your way to becoming a different person? Putting on new clothes, changing from darkness to light - whatever the metaphor the point is the same: the Gospel is not just meant to inform us but to transform us, to make us new people who increasingly resemble Christ. I pray we all come with that expectation this morning.

So after Paul sets up his new metaphor of light and darkness he explains it, beginning in verse 11 when he writes, **“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”** With this warning Paul is reminding us here again that the Christian life is supposed to actually produce something. It's supposed to bear fruit. As you may remember, all through this letter Paul has emphasized that as Christians we are a part of God's family and that as such we have inherited great privileges *and* great responsibilities. We are beloved sons and daughters of our Father in heaven and stand to inherit from our Father everything he possesses. What a privilege! But as children in this family we are also to take on the work of this family, which is of course the bringing of heaven to earth. That is the work of our Father, seeing this world come to resemble heaven, seeing every broken, ruined, dead thing in this world restored to health and wholeness and life. Therefore, our lives become fruitful when they begin to contribute in some way to this work of our Father. If our lives, however, are spent in other pursuits that do not contribute to the realization of God's kingdom on this earth then the works of our lives will ultimately be judged to be unfruitful.

Ever since I've been a kid I've been fascinated by the Guinness Book of World Records. We all are. The idea that somebody, anybody, is the best in the whole world at something captivates us. These are people, many of them, who have invested a great deal of their lives to achieve the status of World Record Holder.

Steve Sansweet amassed an estimated 300,000 unique items to claim the world record for the largest collection of Star Wars memorabilia. The force is definitely with this man. The greatest distance travelled with a pool cue balanced on your chin is 1,668 meters. This prestigious record was set by Ashrita Furman, a man who apparently has plenty of free time on his hands. The record for memorising Pi, the number representing the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter, was achieved by Chao Lu, a Chinese chemistry student, who took over 24 hours in 2008 to recite Pi from memory to 67,890 places. And I can't ever seem to remember the six digit combination on my bike lock! Finally, the longest fingernails in the world belong to Lee Redmond, who put away her nail clippers in 1979 and began to carefully manicure her nails until they reached a combined length of over 28 feet.¹ And I don't even know what to say about this.

While these sorts of records provide great entertainment for the rest of us, I have to tell you that I find myself wondering why a person would choose to invest so much of their life in achieving something that, let's be honest, at the end of the day counts for next to nothing. Right? I'm sure that Mr. Sansweet's Star Wars collection is worth a lot of money, but in the larger scheme of things what is it really worth? What have he and these others really accomplished? I don't want to mean about it, but are efforts like these not defining examples of unfruitful works?

Now before you think I'm being too judgmental, let me make clear I'm not so sure that most of us don't run the same risk in our own lives. Our accomplishments may never be listed in the pages of Guinness, and certainly many of the things we are doing are more significant than growing our fingernails or collecting Yoda puppets, but have you ever stopped to consider how easily a person can invest his or her life in something that the world may label significant but when looked at in the light of God's kingdom work may come out looking more like a trivial pursuit?

Everywhere around us people are giving their entire lives to amassing wealth, or finding pleasure and comfort, or promoting themselves in their career, without a thought of how these efforts have anything to do with the eternal work God is doing in our world. Nothing wrong with money or comfort or career. In fact, all these things are good gifts from God. But they are good gifts placed in our hands to be ultimately invested back into our Father's work in this world. If you make a lot of money but only use it to make yourself and your family comfortable, at the end of the day has anything of eternal value been accomplished? If your wildly successful career has garnered you great respect among your peers, but your work didn't contribute in some way to the work of God's kingdom in this world, then is it possible that all those efforts will be counted as unfruitful works in the end?

Paul seems harsh here, I know. He calls these sorts of works unfruitful works of *darkness*. Is this really darkness that we're talking about here? Well, if the central pursuits of my life are ultimately motivated by pride, or lust, or greed then, yes, this is darkness we're talking about because what I'm really serving and worshipping in life is myself and my own desires.

I work as a pastor. That's been my work for most of my adult life. And I suppose many people would look at the work I do and immediately assume that it must be a fruitful work of light. I pray that it is. But if I'm honest, there have been many times along the way when I have made my work as a pastor much more about myself than it is supposed to be. Believe me, pastors are not immune to using their efforts to justify themselves, or gain personal acclaim, or pursue selfish interests. When that happens, even the work of a pastor can become an unfruitful work of darkness.

Paul says these works must be exposed. Exposed in the lives of others I suppose, but probably first exposed in my own life. In fact, it wouldn't be a bad idea for us all to shed some light on the ways we may be investing our lives - how we are spending our time, our energy, our influence, our abilities - and ask ourselves what is the motivation behind our investment. Remember that everything you possess, your very life, is a gift from God. He's put all this in your hands in hopes that you will use what you possess to join him in his work of restoring and redeeming this world. I'm sure all of us could stand to have a little light shed on these things. Wouldn't we want to know if we are investing our lives in

¹ Records cited at <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/>

efforts that, in the end, will bear no lasting fruit? Of course we would. You're here this morning because you want to see your life make a lasting difference in this world for the sake of Christ.² Wise investments are important to us.

Imagine you are living at the end of the Civil War. You're living in the South but you are a Northerner and you plan to move back home after the war is over. During your time in the South, however, you have accumulated lots of Confederate currency. Suppose that somehow you know for a fact that the North is going to eventually win the war and that the end is imminent. What will you do with the thousands of Confederate dollars which you have accumulated?

Only a fool would continue to invest in Confederate cash which will, in short order, become worth less than the paper it's printed on. A wise person would immediately cash in all those Confederate dollars for U.S. dollars, the only money which will have value once the war is over. You'd only keep enough Confederate currency to meet your short-term needs.³

You see, life is always a question of this sort of investment. Will we invest in what we know will be of lasting value or will we invest in what we are told will ultimately be worthless? For a time my mom was a part of an investment club. This group of older ladies would get together over tea and cookies and help each other learn how they could wisely invest their retirement savings in ways that would pay off in the long run. Warren Buffet himself would have been proud of their efforts. In some ways the church is like an investment club. We are gathered together to encourage and help one another figure out how we can take what God has placed in our hands, not just our material wealth but all of our lives, and invest it all in the fruitful works of eternity.

In this I want to encourage you. I know for a fact that there are so many of you who have made decisions along the way to invest in ways which may have seemed foolish to others around you in the world but which have been deemed wise in eyes of God. Your work, whatever it is, has not just been about making money but about serving the greater good of our world, and because of that intentional priority you may not have made as much money as you otherwise could have made, but your investment will nonetheless pay great dividends in the end. So many of you have given away great portions of your financial wealth. Money which could have been used to make yourself more comfortable has been used to help others who are in great need. Again, a wise investment. Lots of you have made the decision to remain faithful in hard relationships, relationships from which many people would have walked away, and in doing so your life has may not have been made easier necessarily, but it has been made more fulfilled.

When we live in these ways our lives become light. As such they expose darkness. That's what light does. And when your well-lit life goes out into a world full of people who continue to walk in darkness, your life, by contrast, is going to expose what otherwise would be hidden.

A good friend of mine is a firefighter who works on a crew with other men who are not Christians. My friend is a faithful follower of Christ and his life is full of light. Because of this he sticks out on his crew. He makes different choices when it comes to the language he uses, the ways he respects and honors women, the media he views, the way he refuses to mock people his crew serves who have gotten themselves into trouble because of their own dumb decisions. The investment of his life is so radically different from the other men on his crew that the difference cannot be ignored. What's interesting is the response he gets.

Some of his fellow fire fighters resent him for it, even mock him or dismiss him for it. People often do not like it when the light of your life exposes the darkness in theirs. It's what Paul is getting at when he says in verse 13, **"Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light."** Even though my friend is not passing judgment on these other men, that's what it feels like to them. And I'm sure some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. Maybe you have even been attacked at work or school or even in your family simply because the light of your life has shined in places people don't want light shined.

At the same time, however, my friend has also told me that over the years there have been some men on his crew who have seen the light in his life and it has put in them a desire to have that light themselves. You see, light not only can

² I'm reminded here of Paul's words in I Corinthians 3:10-15 where he challenges us to consider the sort of life we are building and how that life will be judged in the light of eternity. Especially verses 12-13: "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³ the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done." (NRSV)

³ Illustration from Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* (Sister, Oregon: Multnomah, 2001), 13.

show a person how lost he is but can also show him the way back home. When Paul quotes words in verse 14 that were probably from an ancient baptismal hymn, he's essentially saying this same thing: **"Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."** He's urging those in the darkness to let the light of Christ expose their unfruitful works of darkness so that they can turn and reinvest their lives in ways that will bear eternal fruit. So you see, when you invest your life in the work of Christ, there will be some people around you – not all, but some – who will see the light in your life and want the same light in their own lives.

Once again, it really all comes down to a matter of investment. God has given you your life. Everything you possess today – your health, your wealth, your relationships, your knowledge, your abilities, your influence – are all gifts from your Father. When you think about it, it's shocking how generous God has been with us, and how much freedom God has given us to make choices with how we invest what has been entrusted to us. And we do have a choice. We can invest wisely or invest foolishly. And sometimes the difference between the two is not so obvious.

When Paul speaks about an investment in unfruitful works of darkness, of shameful deeds done in secret, we may think about the sorts of things done late at night in dark alleys and cheap hotel rooms. I suppose Paul would include those things, but I doubt that was all Paul had in mind. Writer Fredrick Buechner points out that sometimes the foolish investment of our lives can lead us to say things that, on the surface, sound like wisdom: "You've got your own life to lead. Business is business. Charity begins at home. Don't get involved. God helps those who help themselves. Safety first. Drive carefully – the life you save may be your own."⁴ He goes on, "A man can basically be interested in nothing so much as feathering his own nest and still give generously to the Cancer Fund, be on the Board of Deacons, run for town office, and have a soft spot in his heart for children and animals."⁵ Sometimes the difference between the wise and foolish investment in a life is subtle.

Perhaps Jesus himself best framed the contrast between the life wisely invested and the life foolishly invested when he declared, **"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"**⁶ Of course, Christ not only spoke these words but lived them. Jesus died a national disgrace without a penny in the bank or a friend to his name. For our sake he lost his whole life, a perfectly foolish investment from the world's point of view. And his less-than-subtle suggestion is that anybody who considers following him should be prepared to something similarly foolish. The life lived ultimately for itself is a life full of unfruitful work. The life given away, however, for the sake of love and in response to love, becomes a life that gains more than could ever be imagined. Tragically, not everybody desires this life. I think you do. That's why you're here. Furthermore, there are those around you who will see the light in your life and desire this life as well.

That is Paul's encouragement here, and along with encouragement he gives instruction. Beginning in verse 15 he writes, **"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."** This is more talk of investment. But when Paul tell us to make the most of the time, I don't think he's wanting us to worry ourselves about whether we are maximizing every second of every minute of every hour of every day. There's no freedom in that kind of living and the Christian life is meant to be a life of freedom. Instead, I think Paul is encouraging us simply to be watchful. God is going to break into our lives, often in unexpected places at unexpected times. When he does he will have work for us to do, opportunities for us each to serve, and give, and teach, and build, and work, and heal, and love, opportunities to join our Father in the work of seeing heaven realized on earth.

Maybe that's why Paul ends this section with a caution about wine. Nothing wrong with wine, enjoyed in the right proportion. Paul doesn't tell us *not* to drink wine. What he tells us is not to get drunk with wine. Alcohol, as you may know, is a depressant. It depresses the highest centers of the brain, the part of you that gives you judgment, and balance, and self-control, and the ability to discern.⁷ Interestingly enough, the reason why many people abuse alcohol or other substances is because they don't want to face the light and what it exposes in their lives and they find that what they consume can keep them at least temporarily numb in the darkness.

⁴ Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 27.

⁵ Buechner, 28.

⁶ Mark 8:35-36 (NRSV)

⁷ Indebted for this insight to John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 204-205.

Paul doesn't want us to be numb. He wants us to be alert and watchful. So instead of being filled with too much wine, we are to drink the Spirit as we worship and sing and give thanks. In contrast to wine, the Holy Spirit of God is a stimulant. As Jim talked about last week, the Spirit within us "awakens vast energies", stimulating every faculty, our minds, our hearts, our wills. As one writer puts it, "Alcohol dehumanizes, makes us act like animals...indeed worse than animals. The Spirit, however, makes us more human."⁸ It makes us more like Christ who is for us the perfect picture of all God desires humanity to be.

As I conclude I want to ask you to pause and take a moment to reflect on what it is God is saying to you this morning. Remember I urged you at the outset to expect the living Christ to speak to you through his Word today. If you have expected him to do so, perhaps he has. How has Christ shined light on your life this morning? As you consider the life he has placed in your hands, what has he shown you about how you have been investing it and how he wants you to invest it? Maybe Jesus has a word of encouragement, or comfort or invitation. Maybe he has a word of challenge or correction. Either way it's a word of grace, given to you in love. Are you able to hear what it is that Jesus is saying to you this morning and are you willing to trust him and follow him wherever he is leading you?

You may have been informed this morning. That's great. Before Jim/Brett comes up to pray, let's take a few moments in silence to prayerfully reflect on how God is now wanting you to be transformed.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. When you come to worship to hear God's Word read and preached, or when you come to read scripture in your own private devotions, do you come with the expectation of hearing God speak to you in ways that are meant to transform your life?
2. Read Ephesians 5:8-20. What do you notice first?
3. Paul begins this section declaring, "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light." What do you think he means by this? Has this rung true in your own life?
4. At this point in your life would you say that God is shining his light *on* you or *through* you?
5. Has any light been shed here on how God wants you to make wiser investments of your life in the work of his kingdom? Can you be specific?
6. What is one way your life as a Christian is markedly different from those around you who are not following Christ? How do people respond to this difference?
7. Why do people fill themselves with too much wine (spirits!) instead of filling themselves with the Holy Spirit? What would lead a person to make that choice?
8. What do you feel God has told you through this message? How is that going to transform your life?

⁸ Stott, 205.