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I'm just going to jump right in today. Does your behavior matter? Are your words and actions important as a child of God? Or let me ask it this way: Is it important that you believe right? Or that you do right? When asked that way, many may answer, "Believe right." But the truth is, it's no less important that we *do* right. It's important for a different reason, but it *is* vitally important!

So what we want to talk about today is how God wants believers to live... how God expects us to walk with him. Before we get into this, though, I need to make something very clear. The reason we are believers... the reason we walk with God and have a relationship with him has nothing to do with who we are and what we have done or are doing. It has everything to do with who God is and what he has done to establish us in a right relationship with himself.

We are about to look at some verses in Ephesians 5. The danger of pulling a few verses out of a book is that we don't have the chance to see what came before and what comes after. In this case especially, we won't understand the verses we're about to read without knowing what the apostle Paul said before. Back in chapter 2:1, Paul said this: "**As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.**" We crave and need a living relationship with the almighty God. But Paul reminds us that all of us are by nature dead in sin. That is, our disobedience to God, our failure to line up our lives with his will, our desire to call the shots and be in charge instead of allowing God too, etc... all of this means we are dead spiritually. Our sins cut us off from God who is the source of all life. Cut off from him we are dead. Paul says: "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath."

So is it possible to be reconnected to God and made alive again? Not by what *we* do. But here's the good news. "**4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.**"

So Paul couldn't have been more clear in this letter to the Christians living in Ephesus. We are alive. We do have a right standing with God. But God saved us, we didn't save ourselves. He saved us by his grace, not by anything we have done. *He* made us alive, even when we were dead in our sins. This connection to God is one established by faith... that is, a reliance upon the Lord Jesus Christ and *his* life, *his* death for my sin, and his resurrection. It's not accomplished by what I do, but it is rather a gift of God.

Would you allow me ask the questions I asked at the very beginning? Does your behavior matter? Are your words and actions important as a child of God? Is it important that you believe right? Or that you do right? Based on what I just said, you might be inclined to say, "Faith is important, not deeds." But what we want to learn today is that the truth is, it is now vitally important how we live since God has made us his children... since he has given us life instead of death... since we are children of light, not darkness.

So just before the verses we're about to look at, Paul says, "**For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.**"

Just think about this: If God has placed you into his light, aren't you going to shine? If the light of the living God is on you like a spotlight and you are illuminated by his grace, and

you are connected with him... your life absolutely will - it must - reflect his light. That means God's goodness, God's love, God's forgiveness... will be reflected in your daily words and actions. Where God's goodness is not reflected by someone, what can we conclude but that God's light is not shining on them?

So listen to today's text:

15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. 19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This text before us today is intensely practical. I fear we sometimes get it in our heads that the Bible is something that helps us prepare for death, but it doesn't have much to say to me between now and then. And that's just not true. It deals with your everyday living. Every day you do things. You make decisions. You deal with people and have relationships. So what this text challenges us to think about is: Why? Why do you do what you do? Why do you make the decisions you make? This text challenges us to live our lives intentionally and purposefully as those who are living in the light of the Lord. As much as the Bible has to do with the time of your death, it has just as much to do with your daily living. So listen carefully to what God is saying to you today.

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Be very careful how you live! Literally this says, watch sharply or super intently how you are walking. How you go about your life minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day is vitally important, God says! Watch closely how you are walking.

Many of you know that our family recently went on a vacation to Branson, Missouri. It was a great vacation. We got to stay in a time share that my wife's parents own. The complex where the condo was had an indoor pool we could use. So at least once a day we would usually go swimming at this pool. Well as you know, our family has 6 children. We were making our way over to the pool one day. A couple of our children were more eager to get there than their slow-walking parents and they ran ahead. It escaped the notice of my wife and I that our 2 year old son Micah ran ahead with them and they entered the pool area... just the three of them without parental supervision. Two older quickly walked to a table to put down towels and leave shoes. Meanwhile, Micah is walking behind them several feet, slowly walking in their direction. The problem is, Micah was not watching where he was walking. He was looking at the people in the pool... then the people whirlpool. He never glanced in front of him as his eyes were fixed to the side. Fortunately an experience mother was in the pool and saw what was unfolding. She shouted at him to look where he was walking, but he paid no attention. He walked right in to the water. Micah can't swim. But she got to him immediately and pulled him up out of the water. He was fine.

But God warns us that this can happen to us spiritually in our daily walk in this world. God says we must keep our eyes focused on Jesus. Keep our eyes focused on our heavenly goal. So many people walk through life aimlessly looking to one side and the other, not understanding where they have come from, where they are or why they are there and what they should be doing, and they don't understand where they are going much less how to get where they need to

be. It's not that people are stupid, they are just unaware. So be aware. Watch sharply the way you are walking.

For us to be able to do that, we need to first of all have a clear understanding of where we are going, and then we can work backwards from there figure out what is the best way to get there.

Again, using our family vacation as the example: we didn't get in the car without a plan. We get all belted in the van, turn it on and the kids ask: Where are we going, Dad? And I say, "On vacation!" Everyone cheers. But they ask again, "But where?" And I say, "Well, I don't know. I'm going to start driving, and we'll just keep driving until we're on vacation. I hope we'll just know when we get there that we have arrived." How foolish that would be. What a horrible vacation we would have. Instead we first determined our destination: Branson, Missouri. Knowing exactly where we wanted to end up, we were able to map out a driving plan to get us there. From the moment we got in the car until the moment we parked at the condo, we drove with meaning and purpose, and we didn't look to the right or to the left. And we arrived exactly where we wanted to arrive.

So... listen, if you are going to watch sharply where you are walking. If you are going to be very careful about how you live... If you are going to live as wise not unwise... If you are going to make the most of every opportunity... then you first have to have your goal clearly in mind. And the goal of every Christian is simple: we want to be with God in his blessed presence forever and ever. We want to be close to Jesus now and forever. As we talked about at the beginning, God established this relationship already when he took away our sin and guilt through Jesus. When you trust in Christ, you are forgiven and you are close to God. But how do you remain close to God? Well, we naturally want to do what God wants. We want to avoid whatever would separate us from him. Sin, disobedience, rebellion, separate us from God. So because our goal is being eternally in the presence of God, what will our daily life look like? We will do what God wants and what God loves. We will be wise if we live good and holy lives which give glory to God and which show our thankfulness to him for all he has done for us.

We will live **"as wise, making the most of every opportunity."** This phrase adds urgency to our daily walk with God. We will make the most of every opportunity. We will be very careful how we use the limited amount of time that God has given us.

Maybe we don't always realize this, but time is a gift from God entrusted to you to be used for his glory. And the unique thing about this particular gift from God is that it is given to all in the exact same measure. God gives different talents and abilities in different measures. God gives different amounts of material possessions to people... some are rich, some are poor, most are somewhere in between. But time is the great equalizer. On any given day you have the exact same time resources as Warren Buffet, or President Obama, or Bo Pelini. Every single day, their account is credited with the exact same amount of time as yours: 86,400 seconds. You cannot bank that time. You cannot borrow time. Every day you are allotted another 24 hours. And God calls on you to wisely make the most out of every opportunity.

We all know what missed opportunity looks like. Back in April 2007 Apple was on the verge of releasing the first iPhone. Being a tech guy, I read up on the rumor about the phone. I thought it looked very innovative. I thought it would sell very well. I thought to myself many times in the month of April: "I should really invest in Apple stock before they release the iPhone. I bet their stock is going to go up." I thought about it, but never did it. The stock price at the time was just under \$100 per share. Friday's closing price: \$663 per share. A missed opportunity.

I'm sure we could all recount stories of missed opportunities. But the most costly ones are when we pass on the opportunities that keep us on track in our spiritual, eternal goals.

- How much does it cost when we miss opportunities to strengthen our faith in worship or Bible study?
- What is the consequence when we fail to say a kind word to someone...
- fail to encourage our children...
- fail to volunteer to help at church...
- fail to work at our marriage...
- fail to apply ourselves at work.
- What does it cost when we don't make the most of every opportunity and we live foolishly instead of wisely? Only God knows... but the cost is great.

God is calling us to be holy. To conduct ourselves in a different way. To live our lives with a different worldview, and with the a different purpose. Both Christians and non-Christians deal with similar things in their lives. Both will make money, spend money, get married, eat food, drink alcohol, have jobs, have friendships. But in all these things God calls us to be different. He calls us to be holy. Set apart. He calls to live our lives in relationship with him. We don't live with a different philosophy, but with a different kind of life.

So, if our goal is to live a life that reflects and facilitates our relationship with God, we will need to know what the will of God is. So verse 17 says, "**Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.**" The world has no relationship with God, no understanding of God, no faith in God and therefore has totally different goals, and no understanding. So for us to just go with the flow of the world and live like the people of this world would be the height of foolishness. In fact, if there is a habit, or way of thinking, or way of doing things to which you'd say, "Well everyone is doing it," then you have a big red flag that you're living foolishly and not wisely. *If the world is normal, God calls you to be weird.*

So if you want to live wisely and not foolishly, if you want to make the most out of every opportunity... make the most of all your time on earth, then you absolutely must understand *what the will of the Lord is*. The Christian should constantly be asking, "What does God want me to do" rather than, "What do I want to do."

Someone might be thinking, "Well, God's will is a mystery, isn't it? I don't know if God wants me to take this job or that job, marry this person or not, go to this college or that, should we try have a(nother) child now, or should we wait?, have chocolate ice cream or vanilla. Well, it's really not that hard.

Know your God. Know his principals. Know his love. And live accordingly. When the Pharisees tried to itemize the law of God down to 600+ rules, Jesus said: "How about two commandments. Love God above all. Love your neighbor as yourself. And if that's too hard to remember. How about just remembering one word. LOVE." As you walk through each hour of each day, simply ask yourself. "What is the most loving course to take?" Then follow it. Now this only works if you thoroughly understand what love is: Both God's love for you and what it means to love him and others. You'll only get that from a careful study of God's Word.

So let me give an example of this in practice. When I was in 5th grade we lived in Cincinnati, Ohio. My Dad was offered a job as sales representative with the biggest hospital equipment manufacturer in the nation. This would mean a huge pay increase over the job he held. He was excited, but there was a hitch. He would have to move to where they had an open

sales region. One was in centered in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The other was centered in central California. Now he had a decision to make. He could have made the decision based on the way the world makes decision. Which region is the biggest and has the most hospitals so I can make the most money? California. Which region has the biggest population and so the most opportunities for entertainment and fun? California. Which location has the better climate. California. But my Dad chose Tulsa, Oklahoma. Why? Because he did some quick research and found out that in the city in California where they wanted him to move, there were no WELS churches. But in Tulsa, Oklahoma, there was a church with a Christian Day school. And so my Dad made the weird decision to move his family to the place where he knew they would best be served with the Word of God. He knew that he would be showing the most love for God and love for his family by taking the Oklahoma region, and that's what he did.

When you have a decision to make, if you want to make the most out of every opportunity, if you want to be wise and not foolish, understand what the will of the Lord is and let that be the basis for your decision. Which **college** should you go to? Which one will best help you develop your God given talents so you can serve him and others? Which one will have the better chance of you going to church regularly and staying close to God? Should you **marry** this person? Will that person help you grow in your relationship with the Lord Jesus, or have you seen something in their character that gives you pause? Should we have a(nother) child or wait? Will having a child enable you to show God's unconditional love in an intimate, selfless, family relationship? Will having a child drive you to God in prayer far more often? Or will having a child somehow hinder your walk with God or your ability to show love for others?

These are the questions to ask when determining the will of God in your life.

Okay, we have three more verses to look at.

18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

A man filled with spirits will make foolish decisions. He loses inhibition and self control. Such a person will not make decisions that show love for God above all and love for neighbor. Instead, God says to be filled with the Spirit, and then you will make wise decisions.

And the last two verses:

19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God wants us to speak and sing together. What we're doing now is vitally important for our daily walk with God. When you are holy, that is set apart, in a sinful world...when you are living different from the norm... when you are being weird, that is a difficult thing. It's hard to live that way. You need regular encouragement. You need to get together regularly with other people that are just as weird as you are. That's church. If we have anyone who's not a church person with us today, they're thinking, "Did the preacher just say church people are weird?" Yes, I did. So I just confirmed everything you were thinking. We are weird, and we need to get together regularly and speak encouraging words to each other and listen to God's Word together, and sing psalms and hymns together so we can stay as weird as we are.

And as we do this, we are "**always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**" How often do we give thanks to God? Always. Now here, the Greek word translated as "always" means... "always." And what are we always to thank God

for? Everything. And again, this is a nuanced translation in that the Greek word translated as “everything” means... “everything.” In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who promises that he is always present with us, and that everything works out for good, we can always be thankful to God. Somehow he is working an eternal blessing even out of the bad, the evil, the painful and the unfortunate things that happen in our lives. If “closer to Jesus” is our goal, can’t we be thankful in everything?

Let’s wrap this up. In view of the fact that you are saved, heaven-bound children of the most-high God, dear friends. Seize the day. Make the most out of every minute of every hour of every day. Always stay focused on who you are and where you’re going. Be wise, not foolish. Seek God’s will, not your own. Be filled with the spirit. Say and think and do whatever helps you in your walk with God...and helps others. Keep coming here and gathering with fellow believers for encouragement and to be encouraged. And always thank God in everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s the recipe for a meaningful, fulfilling daily life until God choose to bring you to himself in heaven. Amen.