

Wise or Fools

Ephesians 5:15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as **unwise** but as **wise**,
¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.
¹⁷ Therefore do not be **foolish**, but understand what **the will of the Lord is**.
¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,
¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,
²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ."

(Eph 5:15-21)

Wisdom and Foolishness

THE BIBLE HAS VERY MUCH to say about **wisdom and foolishness**, especially, though not surprisingly, in the so-called “wisdom books.” The word “**fool**” (Heb: *nabal*; Gk: *aphron* or *moros*) can **refer to physical sloth or dullness, but its main**

reference is to the intellectual life.¹ Synonyms are “senseless,” “ignorant,” “without reason,” “crazy,” “frantic,” “silly,” “futile,” “worthless,” and especially “godless.” The Psalmist says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do no abominable deeds; there is none who does good” (Ps 14:1). This is where foolishness begins and from this starting point flow all the misdeeds of impurity and unrighteousness.

On the other hand, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7). And so again, God is at the very center of this word too. Biblical wisdom (Heb: *chokmah*; Gk: *sophia*), generally speaking, is “skill for living.”² Synonyms include “insight,” “intelligence,” “knowledge,” “cleverness,” “skill,” “sound judgment,” “shrewdness,” “prudence.” As you can probably hear from that list, wisdom is much more than just mental prowess. In fact, a study of both words in the Scripture very quickly leads you to discover that the mental part is only the foundation. That foundation leads you to either wise or foolish *living*.

¹ Georg Bertram, “Μωρός, Μωραίνω, Μωρία, Μωρολογία,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 832.

² “Wisdom,” Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 955.

- “The wise lay up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool brings ruin near.” (Prov 10:14)
- “The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.” (Prov 3:35)
- “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.” (Prov 10:1)
- “Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool, but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding.” (Prov 10:23)
- “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” (Prov 12:15)

Here is the order of it from a passage we have seen recently in our current study. “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves” (Rom 1:22-24). So, foolishness is **first** a denial of the innate knowledge of God in your soul and **second** a giving of you over by God to false worship and evil behavior, which is exactly what you want to do!

The reason why all this happens to either person is because **God is Wisdom**. Indeed, the term is applied to the Father who is “**the only wise God**” (Rom 16:27; cf. 1Co 1:21;

Eph 3:10; etc.), the Son “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (**Col 2:3**) and who is “the wisdom of God” (**1Co 1:24**; cf. **1Co 1:30**), and the Holy Spirit who is the “Spirit of Wisdom” (**Eph 1:17**; **Isa 11:2**; etc.). It is folly itself not to trust in this Only-Wise God.

To this end, Ephesians continues a string of related dichotomies. We have seen recently the **old man vs. the new man**, the **light vs. the darkness**, and now the **wise vs. the fool**. In these, we have been contrasting two very different spheres of existence: the flesh sphere vs. the spirit sphere, the heavenly sphere vs. the fallen earthly realm. The fallen sphere is characterized by, among other things, darkness and sexual immorality and lewd speech, even as we will see today it is characterized by a kind of stupor or drunkenness and foolish melody.

A few more OT passages on this subject lend themselves nicely to what we will be talking about. **Darkness**: “The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness” (**Eccl 2:14**). **Speech**: “The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin” (**Prov 10:8**). **Sexuality**: “Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table ... Whoever is

simple, let him turn in here! To him who lacks sense she says, ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed’ ... The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way, ‘Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!’ And to him who lacks sense she says, ‘Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.’ But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol [Hades].” (Prov 9:1-5, 13-18).³ Song: “It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools” (Eccl 7:5). Drunkenness. “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Prov 20:1). In other words, most (if not all) of the vices and virtues mentioned by Paul in this section of Ephesians are linked closely to wisdom and folly in the

³ Wisdom (Sophia) and folly are presented as two women in Proverbs. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* is good here, “She [Wisdom] is a commanding presence who summons people boldly and loudly in the most public places of a city—the street, the market, on top of the walls, and at the city gates (Prov 1:20–21). She is an alluring woman who builds a house and invites people to a lavish banquet of food and wine (Prov 9:1–12). As an extension of this evocative feminine imagery, the “son” to whom the speaker in the book of Proverbs repeatedly addresses his instruction is urged to have a love affair with wisdom: “do not forsake her ... love her ... prize her highly ... embrace her.” “Folly is likened to a loose woman who is calling for men to join her for a meal. She tempts them with “stolen water” and “bread eaten in secret” (with probable sexual overtones), but once she gets these “simple men” in her house, she kills them.” *DBI*, “Wisdom” and “Folly,” 955; 296.

OT. Knowing this should help you interpret our passage today correctly.

Text and Context

The passage today is **Ephesians 5:15-21**. As far as a beginning goes, it is pretty easy to spot this as **a new section**. Like **5:1** and **5:7**, **5:15** begins with the word “**therefore**” (*oun*). That sets us off to something new. As far as **the ending** of this passage goes, this is much more difficult. One scholar sees the main unit running from **5:15-6:9**, with the smaller unit as a chiasm from **5:15-20**.⁴ Almost all English Bibles finish the unit at **vs. 21**.⁵ This makes good sense of the five participles (speaking, singing, making melody, thanking, submitting) that are governed by one verb (be filled) back in **vs. 18**.⁶ A few have vs. 21 beginning a new sentence,⁷ though that makes almost no sense of the participles. This wouldn't matter much, except that there is a potential interpretation

⁴ **John Paul Heil**, *Ephesians: Empowerment to Walk in Love for the Unity of All in Christ* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 31-36; 230-39.

⁵ *The Society of Biblical Literature Greek NT* edited by my former professor Michael Holmes has vs 21 continuing the previous sentence. This is interesting to me because I remember in class him telling us he believed it should be considered part of what follows rather than the end of what has just been said.

⁶ Thanks to Michael Emadi for that analysis.

⁷ Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum* has it beginning a new sentence and paragraph.

problem with the next section on submission that could result from how you break up the Greek into English. **That's mostly a theological point, and I'll save it for next time.**

A second and important point about the context to notice and remember about Ephesians is that the **commands here are plural** and in the context of church life. “**Look carefully**” and “**walk**” are both plural verbs in the Greek. Paul is not addressing you as an individual, but you as one new man—Jew and Gentile, Christians living together in the NT temple. This has been one of the dominate points of the letter, and it has to be kept in mind for a proper understanding of what follows.

Third, rather than see what follows **as hodge-podge of random commands**, it is best to understand them as all being related to the main theme of wisdom and foolishness. The passage begins, “**Look carefully then how you walk [continuing that previous theme of walking], not as unwise but as wise ... Therefore do not be foolish**” (**Eph 5:15, 17**). How then would we stop being foolish and start being wise? By listening to and obeying the following commands about drunkenness and singing and giving thanks and submitting.

Finally, look briefly at three of the main ideas of **drunkenness (18)**, **singing (19)**, and **submission (21)**. When you do

even a minute's worth of study on any of these, you very quickly discover that all three of them have been **very heated points of contention** in the church. We bicker over what it means to be drunk or whether the Bible forbids alcohol; we fight over what kinds of songs we should sing, we have denominational splits over the very notion of submission. I'm not saying that none of these are important. Indeed, they are, and we will look at each one in turn. What I am saying is that it is all too easy to take the very things that we are supposed to do in wisdom and turn them into the very folly that exemplifies the world! That makes Paul's list here especially ironic, for how often does it happen that at the very point that a doctrine should lead you to one thing (in this case, wisdom), Satan turns it into the very opposite, causing us to show ourselves the fools.

Drunk or Filled?

Having begun with foolishness and wisdom this morning, **I also want to end there**, and so we will skip past a detailed look at **vv. 15-17** until the end. I want to turn straight to vs. **18**, the “**And do not get drunk with wine, for that is**

debauchery (dissipation), but be filled with the Spirit.” What are we to make of this?

First, “do not get drunk” and “be filled” are the last two **imperative** commands in our passage. The participles all go back to these commands. Therefore, if you want to understand those, you have to understand these.

Second, it is not at all clear that either one of these commands is very well understood in our day. Both have been the cause of division in churches. I believe this is because people wrench both out of context, turning them into basically proverbially sayings rather than continuing this contrast between two spheres of existence.

On one hand you have “do not get drunk” with wine. On one side, you have **teetotalers** who argue that the Scripture never allows a Christian to drink alcohol. This is a **legalistic** “abstinence for everyone” view that adds to the Scripture, fences God’s word, and tries to protect against any possible sin. There are Calvinists who have promoted it⁸ and plenty of non-Calvinists.

⁸ For example, **Peter Masters**, *Should Christians Drink? A Biblical Case for Abstinence* (London: Wakeman Trust, 1992). Masters has long seen himself as the heir of Charles Spurgeon, as he preaches in the same pulpit and writes for the same magazine. It is ironic that Masters takes such a view in this regard given the following story. A woman once asked Spurgeon if smoking was “sinful.” He said, “only if done excessively.” When she inquired as to what excessive would be, he replied “two cigars at once.” Spurgeon was no legalist!

Often, proponents will take obviously true points like *alcohol can be addictive* or *some people can't be around it*, will press certain culture qualifiers like *some cultures needed it because of bad water* or *old-fashioned wine was very diluted*, and they will combine it with their interpretation of certain passages. For example, one person writes, “The Bible specifically forbids the use of ‘strong drink’ (Pro 20:1; 23:29–31). All modern alcoholic drinks are forbidden by this prohibition! In Bible times taking strong drink (unmixed, highly alcohol-laden intoxicants) was reserved for those who were ‘ready to perish’ (Pro 31:6) as a deathbed pain reliever and sedative.”⁹ Never mind the questionable historical commentary. All you have to do is read the passages mentioned to see that it isn't the *use* of strong drink that is forbidden, it is the *abuse* of it. That's the basic idea behind our verse. Gentry summarizes, “No apostle ever commands anything along the lines of: ‘Drink no wine at all.’ The commands are clearly along the lines of: ‘Be not drunk with wine’ (Eph 5:18); ‘be not addicted to much wine’ (1Ti 3:8); ‘be not enslaved to wine’ (Tit 2:3); and so on.”¹⁰

⁹ Charles Phelps, “May Christians Drink Beverage Alcohol?” *FBFI* (Sept 27, 2012), <https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2012/09/27/may-christians-drink-beverage-alcohol/>.

¹⁰ Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *God Gave Wine: What the Bible Says about Alcohol* (Lincoln, CA: Oak-down, 2001), 70.

Then you have some of the *Young Restless and Reformed* crowd to whom, as summarized by John MacArthur, “It seems beer is a more popular topic for study and discussion than the doctrine of predestination.”¹¹ My sister tells a story of going to a Reformed church in California when she first became a Calvinist. After the service, they all went to a restaurant where everyone essentially had to order as much beer as possible to prove their freedom in Christ. If you didn’t, you were looked upon with suspicion of being legalistic. Certainly, there is wisdom to be gleaned in having this discussion on alcohol, but could it not also be that people on both sides have become fools in completely missing the point of the passage? **More on that in a minute.**

Then there is the being “filled with the Spirit.” Some Pentecostals look at being “filled” with the Spirit as being “drunk” in the Spirit (don’t be drunk with wine, be drunk with the Spirit), akin to the way the Apostles were viewed on the day of Pentecost when Peter had to tell them, “These people are not drunk as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day” (Acts 2:15). In this way, the necessity of speaking in tongues or holy laughter are *mandated* if you

¹¹ John MacArthur, “Beer, Bohemianism, and True Christian Liberty,” *Grace To You* (Aug 9, 2011), <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B110809>.

want to be filled with the Spirit. Most see the command here as **individual centered**. Wayne Grudem is representative:

In over a decade of working with students on university campuses, [a friend] has found a great hunger among Christians to know how they may be filled with the Holy Spirit. He rightly points out that effective teaching on this area must include the need (1) to yield our lives fully to God (Rom 12:1; Gal 2:20), (2) to depend fully on God for power to live the Christian life (Rom 8:13; Gal 2:20; 3:2–3), and (3) to obey the Lord’s commands in our lives (1 John 2:6) ... to these steps could certainly be added a prayer that the Holy Spirit would fill us, in accordance with the will of God as expressed in Eph 5:18.¹²

This is similar to the total abstinence view in that it takes some things that are probably good and true but then mixes them with what is an assumption of the meaning of the text rather than actual exegesis. In all this, there is an almost **tyrannical imposition of the individual** going on here. **Thomas Schreiner** says of our modern reading of Ephesians, “**Paul**

¹² **Wayne A. Grudem**, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 783, n. 34.

was not a Western individualist who indulged in a privatized Christianity.”¹³ Timothy Gombis rightly points out,

While such teaching undoubtedly has an important place, where is the basis for such instruction in Ephesians 5? Where does this leave the original readers? Would they have had such a list? Is there evidence that they naturally assumed that Scripture memorization, prayer, an increase in personal purity, and fellowship would have led to the filling of the Spirit, a state of existence from which the practice of godliness naturally flows?¹⁴

So what in the world might Paul be talking about? **First**, “The contrast here is not between two sorts of inebriation: drunkenness was simply a regular, indeed proverbial expression of folly in Jewish Wisdom Literature, and contrasted with the Spirit who (equally proverbially) was seen as the source of wisdom and understanding.”¹⁵ Simply put, **to be a drunkard is to be a fool**. Paul is not talking about drunken-

¹³ **Thomas R. Schreiner**, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 338.

¹⁴ **Timothy G. Gombis**, “Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit: Ephesians 5:18 in Its Epistolary Setting,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 53:2 (2002): 269.

¹⁵ **Max Turner**, “Ephesians,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1242.

ness here so that you can fight about where the line is between sobriety and getting inebriated. It is a comment on *the foolishness* of wanting to be controlled by something that leads to debauchery or dissipation, meaning descending, dissolving, or dispersing into uncontrolled rage, speech, promiscuity, and the like—the very things he has been talking about for many verses. Drunkenness here is therefore a condition, not a one-time act of having too many drinks at a party. Anyone who knows a true drunk knows that this is their state of being. Drunkenness is a metaphor for this.

This is exactly what he meant when he said, “They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (Eph 4:19).¹⁶ Those people, as we have seen, are children of darkness (18,

¹⁶ **Going Deeper.** Several attempts have been made to identify a cultural context for this idea of drunkenness. Some look at pagan meals and others at pagan religious cults, even as we have seen with earlier sections of Ephesians. All of them are fascinating. In these studies, two things are clear to me. First, the pagans often got out of line in these regards. Second, Ephesus was a deeply religious polytheistic city, a fact we have already seen many times. In this case, the main culprits seem to be Dionysius and Pan. As Plutarch writes of Mark Anthony visiting the city, “When Antony made his entry into Ephesus, women arrayed like Bacchanals, and men and boys like Satyrs and Pans, led the way before him, and the city was full of ivy and thyrsus-wands and harps and pipes and flutes, the people hailing him as Dionysus Giver of Joy and Beneficent.” (Plutarch, *Lives—Anthony* 24.3). On the main studies see Peter W. Gosnell, “Ephesians 5:18–20 and Mealtime Propriety,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44:2 (1993): 363–72; Cleon L. Rogers Jr., “The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136 (July–Sept 1979): 249–57; Richard A. Wright, “Drinking, Teaching, and Singing: Ephesians 5:18–19 and the Challenges of Moral Instruction at Greco-Roman Banquets,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* (2017): 85–104. One the various cults at Ephesus see Gary Gromacki, “The Spiritual War for Ephesus,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology Volume 15:2* (2011): 84–86 [77–131].

2:1-3) and are controlled by **the spirit** at work in the sons of disobedience. Curiously, the Jews spoke about the intoxicating effects of drunkenness in satanic/demonic terms:

Do not be drunk with wine, because wine perverts the mind from the truth, arouses the impulses of desire, and leads the eyes into the path of error. For the spirit of promiscuity has wine as its servant for the indulgence of the mind ... So long as he is decent, he may drink. But if he exceeds the limit, the spirit of error invades his mind and makes the drunkard become foul-mouthed and lawless; yet rather than be ashamed, he boasts in his dishonorable action and considers it to be fine. (T.Judah 14)

Take care to be temperate with wine, my children; for there are in it four evil spirits: desire, heated passion, debauchery, and sordid greed. If you drink wine in merriment, showing due respect for the fear of God [i.e. wisdom], you shall live. But if you drink without restraint and the fear of God departs [i.e. folly], the result is drunkenness and shamelessness sneaks in. (TJudah 16:1-2)

Do we not retain something of this in English to this day when we speak of strong alcohol as “**spirits?**” The contrast is between two realms. One realm constitutes **uncontrolled**

passions, vices, corruptions, depravities, and evils. The other is characterized by the **fruit of light**: goodness, rightness, and truth and the fruit of the Spirit that comes out in our behaviors towards one another.

In this way, we should expect that Paul would tell us how we are to be filled with the Spirit. **This is not a proverb** that leaves you to just contemplate what the answer might be. Charles Stanley is an example of someone who doesn't get this. "This verse irritated me. I said, 'OK, OK, but how? How do I do it? What do I do? Where do I begin?' My problem was not one of willingness. I just didn't know how to go about being filled."¹⁷ His solution is to do anything but keep reading.

When Paul said to be filled with the Spirit, he was not commanding us to sit around passively and wait for something to be poured into us. The Holy Spirit has already been poured in. If you are a believer, you have already been filled with the Holy Spirit the way the men and women in Acts were filled. He has taken up permanent residence in your heart. You have all of Him you are ever going to get [he is right about this]. The question is, How much of you does He have?

¹⁷ Charles F. Stanley, *The Wonderful Spirit-Filled Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), see chapter 4.

That is Paul's point in Ephesians 5:18. He was calling for total surrender [sounds like Grudem above] to the gentle—yet firm—prompting of the Holy Spirit. To be filled in this fashion is similar to being filled with fear or sorrow. When we are filled with fear or sorrow, the emotion takes such a preeminence in our lives that all other thoughts and feelings are pushed into the background.

I have always found the Higher-Life (Keswick) language of “I Surrender All” insufferable. If Stanley has no idea what “**be filled with the Spirit**” meant, I have no idea what that means. It is a platitude wrapped in an enigma surrounded by a whole lot of empty nothing. It leads me right back to Gombis' point. How do I know if I have surrendered all? Here, he seems to say being filled is simply having a **nice feeling** in your heart, and this feeling takes away all other thoughts but God. What happens when that feeling goes away? “Feeling” Christianity is a terrible taskmaster.

Curiously, the reason Stanley goes here is because, “**Paul didn't include a step-by-step plan.**” In fact, Paul gives a **five-step plan**. All we have to do is keep reading the text. Being filled with the Spirit is not rocket-science, but neither is it a Charles Finney anxious bench altar call. The main verb is “**be filled.**” Its antithesis is “**do not be drunk.**” Drunkenness

exemplifies the dark and unlawful behaviors of Gentiles. Therefore, the fullness must exemplify the light and godly behaviors of Christians who have the Spirit of Wisdom and are “in Christ,” who is the Wisdom of God.

Song, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

Sure enough, this is what we find in what follows. **Five participles** (-ing words) follow the main verb “be filled.” They tell you what being filled means. **Critically, these things are not the result of being filled with the Spirit, so that you can only do them if you are first filled. Rather they are the means by which we become filled.**¹⁸

The first three are found in **vs. 18**. They are “**addressing**,” “**singing**,” and “**making melody**.” The **subject** these is three similar words. We do this with “**psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs**.” Curiously, the parallel in Colossians uses the same three words but talks about doing this “**in all wisdom**.” “**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God**” (**Col 3:16**).

¹⁸ **Gombis**, “The Fullness of God,” 269.

As with drunkenness and Spirit-filling, Christians have sometimes shown their foolishness on that which is supposed to be our very wisdom! **Music in the church is often a battle**. Indeed, they have been called “worship wars.” This is partly tied to how, of all the things God has given to us in corporate worship, music is the most subjective and self-experiential. You may like a form of music that I don’t.

The music wars of “**contemporary**” vs. “**traditional**” have been fueled by many things. Sometimes it is **doctrinal**. There are some incredibly banal and sometimes downright heretical songs that have become very popular on Christian radio and have been swept up into the “praise and worship” part of many churches. Sometimes it is just a change of **feel** (that song doesn’t feel like the ones I sang growing up). Maybe they have instruments. Maybe the music is so loud you need earplugs, which is a literal thing in many mega-churches). And so on.

This liberalization of church music has been countered by a **longstanding Reformed view** that we should sing without any instruments except our mouths (and don’t forget the pitch pipe) and we must only sing **Psalms-only**. I want to speak to this for a moment. You might read the psalms-only position as absurd because Paul right here says, “**psalms,**

hymns, and spiritual songs.” Our church has a hymnal. Inside this hymnal is a Psalter supplement. And under the chair you are sitting in you might find a short white book containing “praise songs.” So, obviously Paul is talking about those three things, right?

Well, not really. That’s reading a 21st century definition of music back into the past. As a matter of fact, all three words are used in **the first verses** of many psalms in the Psalter. “**Psalms**” (ψαλμοῖς, *psalmois*) (“**For the End, a Song of David among *the* Psalms**” (Ps 4:1 LXA; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; etc.). “**Hymns**” (ὕμνοις, *Humnois*), “**For the End, a Psalm of David among the Hymns for the eighth**” (Ps 6:1 LXA; 53:1; 54:1; etc.). “**Songs**” (ὠδαῖς, *odais*), “**For the End, a Song of David among *the* Psalms**” (Ps 4:1 LXA; 64:1; 65:1; 66:1; etc.). Thus, Psalms-only people will contend that these are really just synonyms for the songs of the psalter.

I reject Psalms-only theology, though I do think it is both wise and good to sing the psalms (and not just one verse from the psalms; would that more of God’s people would rediscover the psalms). This is not the place for explaining all my reasons. I will say one thing relevant to our text. **Paul adds a word** to the last in the list “songs.” He calls them “**spir-
itual songs.**” This word (πνευματικαῖς, *pneumatikias*) is not

found anywhere in the OT. There are “songs” in the OT, but not “spiritual songs.” The reason why seems to be that Paul is thinking about **the NT temple** of believers who have been **filled in a new way by the Spirit** (*pneuma*) from the previous verse. This begins to quickly shut the door on Psalms-only theology because, as the NT itself demonstrates in places like **Philippians 2:6-11**, Christians were writing and singing new songs about Jesus as demonstration of the Spirit’s filling. That’s what Paul is telling them to do now, sing new songs based on the new reality in Christ.¹⁹

My point in bringing all of this up is to reinforce, but now add to, what I said about drunkenness. We are **a peculiar people** who will fight about just about anything. We must not turn matters of **Christian liberty** (how much alcohol and what songs we sing are clearly that) into matters of absolute dogma where we anathematize one another if they disagree. That is the opposite of what Paul is teaching here.

¹⁹ I liken the writing of new songs to the praying of new prayers and the preaching of new sermons. Singing, praying, and preaching are all elements of worship, commanded by God and non-negotiable. However, no one argues that we should only pray the prayers of the Bible or only preach the sermons of Scripture. In other words, the content of these things is to always be informed by Scripture, but everywhere and everywhere we are commanded to preach, pray, and sing for each new generation.

Instead, we are to use biblically inspired songs, including literally the many songs in the Bible in the Psalter and beyond, to first be “*addressing*” one another. One translation says, “*speaking*” to one another. This returns us to the earlier “*speech*” lists. Rather than “*corrupting talk*” we “*build up*” (Eph 4:29) and “*speak the truth with our neighbor*” (4:25). Rather than “*filthiness*” or “*foolish talk*” or “*crude joking*” we are to “*speak*” to one another with godly songs! This means that one of the chief functions of Christian music is *to talk to one another*. Music is didactic. That is, *it teaches us*. It is different than a sermon, but just as important, because it hits both mind *and* soul. This is why it is so important that our songs be good and true.

Second, we are to be “*singing*” them. That’s the point of songs. You sing them. This would seem to mean we should be *making songs singable*. Some periods of church history have done this better than others, even as some cultures have. Songs that are fit for only solos are not good in church, because this is corporate stuff we are talking about here. He has in mind the NT temple, church, corporate worship, and so on. Songs that are so high or so complicated musically that no one can sing them might also be put into this mix. Yes, we can teach people to sing, and that should help with

some of all this. Nevertheless, we should want songs that help us sing. Wisdom should teach us the positives and negatives of various forms of music and teach us how to write songs well.

Third, we are to be “*making melody*.” Even here I’ve run across some bizarre teachings. One popular home-school teaching says this verse means we should never have harmony in our Christian songs, because Paul only says to make *melody*.²⁰ Talk about missing the point. Here, the subject changes **from one another to the LORD**. We are to make melody **to the LORD**. These songs are not just for us, they are to God. As Luther wrote, *We sing to the God right thankfully, loud songs of hallelujah*. As it is melody, hopefully those songs are not just practical, but also beautiful! It also moves from the **external** (mouth) to the **internal** (heart). It isn’t just that songs are to move your heart, it is that you are to sing *from your heart*, from the inside.

²⁰ This is the general thrust of the teachings of Bill Gothard; it borders on racism. Cf. **Bill Gothard**, “What the Bible has to Say About ... Contemporary Christian Music: Ten Scriptural Reasons Why the “Rock Beat” Is Evil in Any Form (Oak Brook, IL: The Institute in Basic Life Principles, 1990), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leavingfundamentalism/2014/09/18/weird-parts-of-my-christian-rock-childhood/>; “Bill and Music,” *Discovering Grace* (Dec 25, 2015), <http://www.discoveringgrace.com/2015/12/25/bill-and-music/>.

This raises a question of why song? I was rereading my favorite book this week and I realized that Merlin knew the answer.

And it came to me while I was singing—watching the ring of faces around the night’s fire, their eyes glinting like dark sparks, gazing raptly as the song kindled and took light in their souls—it came to me that the way to men’s souls was through their hearts, not through their minds. As much as a man might be convinced in his mind, as long as his heart remained unchanged all persuasion would fail. The surest way to the heart is through song and story, a single tale of high and noble deeds spoke to men more forcefully than all of blessed Dafyd’s homilies ... Perhaps it is how we are made; perhaps words of truth reach us best through the heart, and stories and songs are the language of the heart.²¹

The fourth participle seems related, and I just mentioned it. “*Giving thanks.*” He may still have in mind the songs. Thanksgiving certainly fits with singing, and we are still in the middle of that same sentence begun in vs. 18. If so, more than pure doctrine, our songs should be songs of thanksgiving. For what? “*For everything to God the Father in the*

²¹ Stephen R. Lawhead, *Merlin: Book Two of the Pendragon Cycle* (New York: Avon Books, 1988), 150.

name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 4:20). Not giving thanks to God for all things is the root sin of Romans 1, which leads God to give us over to all of our wicked desires. It leads to that first godless thought that there is no God. It then leads to an utterly foolish life and the moral shame that comes with it. Our songs and our lives with one another need to be more reflective of the thanks we have in our hearts to God through Christ Jesus.

Astonishingly, one Psalms-only proponent raises the objection that the Psalms do not sing Jesus’ name. He rightly said that we sing about Christ throughout the Psalter as “Lord” “God” “Christ” “Savior” “Redeemer” and many other things. But he added that we indeed do not specifically use the name “Jesus” because, “Nowhere are we ever commanded to sing the name of Jesus.”²² He seems to have forgotten this verse, where we are commanded to give thanks in the name of Jesus as a conclusion to singing. It is hard to think of something more foolish than this, all so you can protect a view of the regulative principle that has been disagreed on by the Reformed since the beginning. We must be

²² Greg Price, “Exclusive Psalmody 7/7 Objections to Exclusive Psalmody Answered by Pastor Greg Price,” SermonAudio (6-25-01): around 9:00; <https://www.sermonaudio.com/saplayer/playpopup.asp?SID=62501134616>.

people who learn the point of the Scripture rather than turning it into its opposite so that we can “be right.” Have your view. Psalms-only is not necessarily wrong, but it also isn’t the only way. Each must be convinced in his own mind. But [be charitable with matters of Christian liberty](#).

Submitting to One Another

The final participle is “[submitting to one another](#).” This we are to do “[out of reverence for Christ](#)” ([Eph 5:21](#)). If you notice, [the next verse](#) also uses the word “[submitting](#)” (although it isn’t found in the Greek). As I said earlier, it is difficult to know the exact line of thought that Paul has in mind with this verse. To me, it seems [transitional](#). It is not only the last word of this sentence and thus is directly related to being filled with the Spirit; it is the last word of the entire long section, going back to at least early ch. 5. As such, it is [a summary word for all of our behavior](#) up to this point in church and as Christians together, even as it prepares us for the special relationships he will talk about next which are found in the form of family life.

Sadly, submission is [yet another area](#) that moderns have taken in crazy directions. On one wing you have absolute

patriarchal totalitarianism where only one submits while the other domineers. On the other you have the obliteration of all distinctions between all forms of relationships, creating total sameness that results in pure anarchy where submission is the dirtiest word imaginable.

Here, we are commanded to *submit to one another*. In the next several verses, he will give **examples** of how this work in relationships such as **wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters**. But when you refuse to be angry or to commit immorality or to use filthy language together or teach one another in song and so on, you are also submitting to one another. The point is, in whatever relationship you are in, there needs to be mutual submission, even though that submission doesn't always look the same for each party. While **we'll be talking about this in the weeks to come**, the main point here is that we do this not blindly, not in anger, not from a position of power, but *out of reverence for Christ*. It is the Father/Son relationship that teaches you the ultimate meaning of submission. Therefore, it flows from love.

Summing these up, the point of these five participles is that they show you the means by which you become spirit-filled. He **isn't** talking about being saved and indwelt by the

Spirit. He **is** talking about having the NT temple—the church—reflecting the holiness of the new man, of light, and of wisdom. While you should surely pray that God would help you do them, this is not some mystical prayer that God would first fill you first so that you could do these things. While you should surely surrender your rebellious will that sometimes doesn't want to do them, this is not something you must first “surrender all” in order to be filled. Just do them. Obey. You already have the Spirit in fulness. While you obviously have responsibility as an individual here, the point is you do them together. This is not about individual piety but corporate life together. When you do, you are being filled with the Spirit in the temple he has come to indwell.

Understand the Will of the LORD

If you are in Christ, **you already are filled** even as you already are light and wisdom and the new man. Therefore, you are to act in wisdom by doing these things, and doing them becomes the means by which you are filled together.²³

²³ Gombis writes, “The way in which the church carries out its identity as the dwelling place of God in Christ by the Spirit is *‘by speaking* (λαλοῦντες) to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *by singing* (ᾄδοντες) and *by making melody* (ψάλλοντες) in your hearts to the

This takes us **back to the first three verses** that we skipped over. In other words, if we are concluding by understanding the relationship of these things to wisdom and foolishness, then we know we are interpreting it properly.

All of what we have said was prefaced by these verses. First, “**Look carefully how you walk, not as unwise but as wise**” (Eph 5:15). He is still talking about **walking** in the Spirit and in light. Therefore, being filled with the Spirit here is walking by the Spirit, doing what you are commanded to do.

These things God is teaching you to do are wisdom. That is, they show you the best way to live in this world. Many people are unwise in a lot of these things, and they suffer daily problems, especially in their relationships because of it. One particular way we can be unwise is in our use of time. “**Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil**” (16).

He **isn't saying** that God created time as evil. “**When Paul says ‘the days are evil,’ he does not mean that they are created evil or that they are by their very nature evil. Rather he says this of the troubling events that occur in time**”

Lord, *by giving thanks* (εὐχαριστοῦντες) always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and to God the Father, *by submitting* (ὑποτασσόμενοι) to one another in the fear of Christ.”²³ Gombis, “Fullness,” 270.

(Chrysostom, *Homily on Eph 18.5.15-17*). “The days are called evil because of the malice of people, which is done on days, for the days are good, for they are the creation of God and so are good” (Lancelot Ridley, *Commentary on Ephesians*). “Time” here refers to the present evil age, and this goes right along with the ideas of drunkenness or foolishness or darkness or the old man.²⁴ They are all spheres of existence. The point is you are to, “Seize the day; don’t let this opportunity pass; take advantage of the moment God provides. Having been redeemed by his blood ... now redeem the time for him, making the most of every opportunity so that his name will shine in all the earth.”²⁵

In this way you will “not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph 5:17), or as he said back in vs. 10, “discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” The fool does not understand God’s will because he is too busy propping up his own will. We’ve seen ways that even the best of us have done this even with our very passage, making it all about me personally, or making it about how I can exert my

²⁴ “The ‘time’ in v. 16, though, is not the latter part of an individual’s life [Ecc 12:1] but the period of time from Christ’s first coming to the Parousia; it is ‘this age’ (1:21).” S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*, ed. Wayne H. House, Hall W. Harris III, and Andrew W. Pitts, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 449.

²⁵ Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 259.

opinion over everyone else's, or making it about how I can justify some bizarre thing that isn't even being talked about here.

But **the wise man listens to the Lord speak** through his word and takes care to understand his meaning and to put it into practice. That practice is particularly to be done in the church, together, so that you might be full of the Spirit, people now brought into union and oneness of the new man in the Son of God.

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