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**New Year 2021**

**Ephesians 5:15-16**

I've had one particular scripture that I've been using since the year 2015 and this year I want to just kind of give you a compilation of some of the approaches that we've looked at these last few years to look at this one particular scripture. It's *Ephesians 5:15-16* which says: *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.*

Now there's three different commands in this scripture. First there's watch how you walk; secondly is make the very best use of your time; and thirdly it's understand that the days are evil. We're looking at a New Year's resolution and so the first thing that we want to work on in 2021 is how to walk wisely. You see wisdom, like joy, like patience, it does not yield to a simple English definition. And like with joy and like with patience we need to look at the scripture to find out just what wisdom really is. You know most folks confuse wisdom with intelligence. They're not one in the same thing. Biblical wisdom is not the ability or

the intelligence to do well at *Jeopardy* even if it's Bible verses. It's not just the accumulation of knowledge about things biblical even though the Bible is the source of biblical wisdom. I think you've often heard me use the simple two-word definition that we give of what biblical wisdom really is, but even that needs some further explanation. I mean, we describe wisdom simply as "skillful living." J. I. Packer describes it this way, he says: "Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact the practical side of moral goodness. As such it is found in its fullness only in God." That practical side of moral goodness is the power that God offers us through wisdom. And practically speaking, I would say wisdom really is the power to perceive the word, the world and the kingdom of God with a supernatural ability. It's really the ability to connect the dots in each one of those spheres in a way that points directly to and from the kingdom of God, and the place where that starts is really the word of God.

Let me tell you how God showed me that in my own life. Just to go all the way back to 1971, I had just graduated from college, I was deeply, deeply in love. I was about to marry the most beautiful, intelligent and kind woman I had ever met and I thought I was literally on top of the world. *James 1:5* says: "If any of you

*lack wisdom,"* well, I did, but it was of no concern whatsoever to me. I had no need for God's idea of wisdom because I was one of the smartest people I had ever met. I mean, I was absolutely convinced I was brilliant. I had no idea I was a living, breathing definition of what a fool is. I mean we think of a fool as a knucklehead, you know, he's a dimwit, he can barely work his way out of a paper bag. God's way of describing a fool is very different. *Psalm 14:1* says: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."* Well those words and that idea defined me. I didn't just say that in my heart, I said it to anyone who would listen. I was incredibly impressed with me and my opinions. I decided that if there was a God, he had to be just like I envisioned him, and when he wasn't, I just concluded that he didn't exist. Nevermind that my God was not God at all, it was an idol that I had constructed inside of my own mind, something that just about every unbeliever does. I was as guilty as the next person who was saying, "My God is," you know, just fill in the blanks. I never had any inkling of knowing that the first part of wisdom is knowing or at least suspecting what *James 1:5* is saying when it says: *"If any of you lacks wisdom,"* that is that you might not have it. That never occurred to me. And you know scripture addresses that kind of mindset as well. *Proverbs 12:15* says: *The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.* *Proverbs 28* says: *Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks*

*in wisdom will be delivered.* The very first thing that God did when he opened my eyes was to introduce a genuine fool like me to the wisdom of his word, and it was a wisdom unlike anything I had ever been exposed to before and that's understandable because God's wisdom is antithetical to human wisdom. I mean oftentimes it's its direct opposite. And that's why God says in *1 Corinthians 1:18*: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Through the miracle of God's saving grace, the foolishness of the idea that God himself would become a man, live a perfect life and then offer that life up on a cross so that I by faith could claim his righteousness as my own and stand before God now worthy of his heaven, that idea that had seemed so ridiculous to me before, well it now made perfect sense. God's way had stood man's way on its head. *1 Corinthians 1:25* says: *"For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."* I mean it just seemed like every time I opened the Bible God was exposing me to insights and ways of thinking that I had never ever thought of before. Dots were being connected that were never connected before and they were all coming from the printed word in the pages of a book that I had nothing but scorn for. I spent the first 23 years of my life learning as much of the world's wisdom as I could and I found out over and over again that it was absolutely no match for God's wisdom. And I learned that that, too, was part

of the wisdom that God had for me in his word. There in his word he said this in *1 Corinthians 3:18*, he said: *Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness."*

Well, I've spent the next 48 years studying the wisdom that God has given us in his word and all that I've learned in that time could fit in a thimble with a lot of room to spare compared to the vastness of the wisdom that's there. I mean it's God's wisdom and it's coalesced into a printed word but that doesn't mean that it's available to anyone. The word of God is a closed book to anyone that doesn't have the wisdom of God to understand it. And you don't get that wisdom from training, you don't get it from genetics, you don't get it from discipline; you get it simply by asking for it. I mean this wisdom is not like chemistry, it's not like physics or literature or even theology. Some of the most brilliant minds there are in places like Harvard and Yale and Princeton, they're hopelessly blind, deaf and dumb when it comes to understanding the simple truths of the gospel. You know, all three of those institutions were at one time centuries ago bastions of truth and bastions of biblical wisdom because they sought that wisdom to give glory to God. In fact they humbly asked for it.

In 1636 Harvard's charter said this: "Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, John 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning. And seeing the Lord only giveth wisdom, let every one seriously set himself by prayer in secret to seek it of him." See in 1636, Harvard knew where wisdom came from. Subsequently it's evidently forgotten. I mean, those places are now theological wastelands for the most part because God has withdrawn his wisdom and left them to pick over the carcass of man's wisdom. God gives his wisdom freely to anyone who sincerely asks for it, but he hides it from anyone arrogant enough to think they're entitled to it. Jesus himself said in *Matthew 11:25*: "*I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes.*" If anyone lacks the wisdom of God's word, he just has to ask. And that's the scripture in James that I repeat virtually every day as a prayer. It's taken from *James 1:5* which says: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.* If any of you lacks wisdom, it's just James' way of stating the first part of a conditional clause that's stating the obvious. I mean James is just assuming that we all lack wisdom. You know if we had a potluck supper and there's a

bunch of people sitting around waiting for grace to be prayed before eating and after grace I say, "If any of you are hungry, the line forms over here on the right," I'm not really asking if anybody's hungry, am I? I mean I'm assuming everybody knows they're hungry, that's why they're at a potluck. James here, he's doing the very same thing, I mean, the fact is whether it's the word or the world or the kingdom, all of us lack the wisdom that God is offering us, and the requirement to receive it seems just too easy. All you have to do is ask.

Actually there's a second requirement and it's in the very next verse. It's a requirement that requires that I need to believe I truly have the wisdom that I'm asking for. This is the whole thought in *James 1:5-7*: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.* So there's not one requirement, there's two.

Number one, you have to ask; and number two, you have to believe that you're going to receive. It never ceases to amaze me that folks don't do this every single day, because there's not a day that goes by that I do not ask for wisdom repeatedly and he gives it to me repeatedly. And you know why? Because I ask. I mean I'm

confident that I've received wisdom from God not because of me but because I believe God's promise. I mean I knew that I lacked it, I knew that I needed it, I knew that if I asked God he would give it, and so I'm confident that I have it. I mean we're trying to look carefully how we walk. We want to walk wisely, and the wisest way to do that is by accessing the wisdom that God has given us in the Bible.

I mean we lack wisdom in the most critical thing and that is understanding God's word. You see the scripture is in the language that God uses to communicate that wisdom to us. And the more you read scripture, the more you memorize, the more you take in, the more wisdom you're going to find you possess. And here's how. I mean first you have to understand, God tells us repeatedly that his ways are not our ways, that he doesn't think like we think. And so the Bible gives us insight as to how God thinks, and as we see oftentimes it's not the way we think; It's always better and deeper and wiser. And here's how we can take that wisdom and make it personally ours. Just think of God's word as the master program and each verse of each book is like a file that you download into your spiritual hard drive. It's the source of knowledge that God's Holy Spirit will then draw on to give you individually the wisdom God wants to give you. You can't learn a foreign language without studying its vocabulary and the Bible is the vocabulary that God



uses to speak to you. The more limited your understanding of the Bible, the more limited your vocabulary in learning how God speaks. And the more scripture you're familiar with, the easier it is for the Holy Spirit to connect the dots in scripture to give you insight into what it means to live not as unwise but as wise. And at the end of the year this is the perfect time to start or renew a daily contact with scripture.

For years now I've been using the through the bible in one year bible, and the one that I use is the MacArthur one year Bible. And you know, sometimes you find yourself reading material that you can't imagine you have any use for, like regulations concerning skin conditions in Leviticus or these very long genealogies of the patriarchs. This is what God says, God says: *All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.* So practically speaking, I can tell you that God can and does use all parts of his words to communicate truth both globally and personally. When I'm looking for God's wisdom for a particular issue I often hear God speaking to me not audibly but scripturally. I mean that is as I'm praying through an issue, many times a particular scripture or scriptures that bear on that exact issue will just pop into my mind. That's God's Holy Spirit communicating to me through his

word. And the more scripture that I have command of, the easier it is for God to communicate. I mean it's not magic but it is supernatural. It takes effort and discipline to study the Bible but its reward is God's own wisdom. And the more scripture you have in your heart and mind, the better to individually perceive that wisdom.

Practically speaking let's say I'm thinking about making a donation. It's been on my mind. I've been wondering about it. I'm pondering and I have some scriptures that are bouncing around in my head. Or I'm reading a scripture, let's say the scripture just jumps off the page at me. This is *Luke 6*, it says:  
*Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.*" Well, if that happens, chances are God is speaking to you through his word. But of course you have to exercise wisdom. You know, folks have tried to use scripture to pick horses for horse racing and stocks in the stock market and all kinds of genuinely bad ideas because they think about scripture as if it's magic. But it's not; it's God will communicating itself to man. But you have to have vocabulary to communicate any exercise of wisdom. Just think of something simple like cooking and recipes. If I said to you, "Braise the diced the onions until they're completely

caramelized," most of you who are into cooking would have an idea of what I'm talking about. But people like me who can barely boil water, I mean, they struggle with words and figure out what in the world does that mean? Well, it's similar with our knowledge of scripture. The more familiar you are with God's word, the more familiar you are with his concepts, the more God's going to be able to communicate to you through his word. You know braising, dicing and caramelizing make perfect sense to cooks just like justified, sanctified and glorified makes perfect sense to believers, or no. That's why God says: *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*

So God calls us to look very carefully at how we walk, not as unwise but as wise but then he further describes that wisdom by saying *making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.* Okay. Okay, how do we do that? How do we make the best use of time? I mean, time's the only commodity that virtually every one of us receives in equal amounts. At the end of the day literally every one of us on the planet has been given the exact same twenty-four hours. God charges us to make the best use of those hours. He's not silent as to how we are to do that. I mean the scripture describes three different places that we can be in with regard to time. We can be in the past, we can be in the present or we can be

in the future. Two of those places are just reference points, they're just stopping points that are okay to visit as long as we don't make any plans to stay there. Those places are the past and the future. God says we can learn from the past and we can plan for our future but he expects us to live in the present. And so we need to look into these three different places in time to see what God's idea of making the best use of time is all about because God has much to say about living in the past, present or future.

First God has something to say about the future in his word, this is the place where believers place their hope. I mean biblical hope is not wishful thinking. It's a confident expectation not that I know what the future is going to hold, but that I know who holds the future. And I know, I know that's a cliché but it's a cliché that's based on absolute truth. You see, the secret to being able to joyfully anticipate the future, it's rooted in understanding that God is firmly and absolutely in charge of it. There's unlimited power in having an understanding even in the worst of circumstances in the world. You know that they can't stop you because you know that you have God at your back, and that comes from trusting Jesus. Listen to what Jesus said in *Matthew 6*. He said: *"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more*

than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. So Jesus is asking us to look for the obvious sign of God's sovereign care even for the humbler parts of his creation. And he asks if we're willing to believe that God cares for us at least as much as he does flowers and birds. So we can look to the future with joy and hope not because it's a nice thing to do but because it's one of the keys that God gives us to survive.

The other key that God gives us can allow us to accept repeatedly a

future that begins to look like it's going to crumble. We do it by visiting that other place in time that God calls us to visit at moments like that and that is the past. Literally hundreds of times in scripture God commands us to visit the past by calling on us to -- quote -- "remember." *1 Chronicles 16* says: *Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually! Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered.* Listen to how David uses the past to remember what God has done to use that to strengthen his hope for the future. This is *Psalm 40*. He says: *A Psalm of David. I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.* See David looks back, he looks back at this miry bog that he was in and he describes a time of patient waiting and then being lifted up out of that bog and set on a rock, so much so that he has a new song of praise for his God. We need to personalize that. You know, I can think of a half dozen or so miry bogs that I've been in in my life, and some of them required more patience than I ever thought I could muster, but in each case God faithfully lifted me out and set my feet on that rock. Many times I've spoken about God's miraculous provision that got me through some absolutely impossible situations. I've told it so many times before I'm not going to bore you with my septic tank

story or my car stories or with some of the other specific circumstances where God literally moved heaven and earth to demonstrate his love and his care for me and my family. But each time he has, I -- well, I shouldn't say that. I say each time he has, I've remembered. I could write a book about things that I've forgotten that God has done for me. I remember only a small fraction of them, and I deeply regret that. I wish I had written down every single time God came through miraculously in my life because when things get dicey, it's those remembrance of those things that God has done in my particular past that enables me to trust that he's going to do it again.

You know, I've used the term the "celestial bank account" to describe what happens when you sense God's presence getting you through some kind of difficult circumstance, and each time he does, he's also giving you something to remember. He's making a deposit in your celestial account that he wants you to draw on when things begin to look bleak. And it doesn't have to be some kind of spectacular miracle. More often than not it's God simply letting you know that he's got his fingerprints on the events of your life and that you're not alone. And each time he does, you have one more example of his faithfulness to look back on.

I thought of an example. I was trying to give an example. And I

was remembering back a couple of years ago we had a Grace at Grace with Mike and Cindy Gingerich who are missionaries in the Philippines. And we were sitting around talking, and at one point we asked Mike if he had any stories to tell about God lifting him up out of the miry clay. And he shared with us how he had been struggling with whether or not he really should move his family to the Philippines to go into full time mission work. And he said his family -- they were in the midwest, it was just like now, it was right in the middle of winter, and it was snowy and icy and nasty and they were unable to get out because of the snow and the ice. And Mike realized that they were missing something vital to their family: toilet paper. The family was completely out of it. The weather was just too nasty to go out and buy some. And Mike said that that simple need put him in the middle of a deep funk. He started thinking and the devil started working, he started thinking how can I trust that God's going to take care of my family and all of its needs in the Philippines if we're stuck here in the midwest with this simple need that I can't even address. He said he just happened to be watching out the window and he saw the mailbox get approached by the postman, opened up the mailbox and he left a package, and so he said he went out there trudging through the snow and in the mailbox was a package. It consisted of one roll of toilet paper. It was a free sample. I mean you certainly can make the claim that it was just a coincidence, but Mike said he knew



better. I mean to Mike it said everything he needed to know about God's desire to meet his family's need. And he described it, he said it happened many, many years ago but he still teared up as he was explaining this simple little miracle that God had done in his life. And that's why it's incredibly important to constantly build that celestial bank account by doing just what God says to do, by remembering, to remember things that God has done in the past. I remember a significant fraction but it's a fraction of the things that God has done, my septic tank and the car issues. Those are powerful means of pulling me up on the miry clay and setting my feet on the solid rock when things start going south. It's important to memorialize even the tiniest things like a roll of toilet paper because God invites us to revisit the past to give us hope for the future and confidence in the present. Again we're looking at what Paul is saying here. Paul is telling us to *look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil*. We want to walk carefully and wisely in the present, and we do that when we remember the wondrous works that he's done.

And so finally we want to walk expediently making the best use of time, because the days are evil. I don't think anybody needs any convincing. We don't need more than two minutes to discuss the fact that we all know that the days are evil. So how do we make

the best use of time? Well, first of all how about scheduling time specifically for prayer? You know Janice and I for the last, I don't know, 20-some-odd years, we walk every day outside for about 45 minutes. We use that time to pray. If it's raining or nasty out, we just sit in our chairs in the living room and do it. It's been an incredibly wonderful thing to have that habit. So why not set aside some time specifically for prayer or for reading or for growing your relationship with Christ. How about shaving an hour off watching TV or surfing the net to grow your ability to hear God speak to you. I mean is that worth it? Understand, this is something that I think is absolutely critical to get. This is not for God's sake; this is for our sake. I mean I think we think if I carve out a little bit of time and I spend some time, God's going to like me a little bit more after I do that. You have to understand that God can't you like you or love you any more than he already does, because the love that he first expressed towards you was the maximum that God could ever express. *John 13* says this, it says: *When Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.* Now the end for Jesus was the cross. Dane Ortlund describes what loving to the end this way means. He says this: "And in venting that righteous wrath God was not striking a morally neutral tree. He was splintering the Lovely One. Beauty and Goodness himself was being uglified and vilified.

'Stricken, smitten by God' (Isa. 53:4). So that we ugly ones could be freely beautified, pardoned, calmed. Our heaven through his hell. Our entrance into Love through his loss of it. This was what loving to the end meant." So please don't think of this as a way to earn God's love because you already own it. It already belongs to you if you're a child of God. This isn't for his sake, it's for ours, because our greatest joy and deepest pleasure is knowing Christ. We just don't fully realize that yet.

As you look back over this last year, ask yourself if you are pleased with how you've used the time that God has given you. Have I drawn closer to Christ this year? Have I firmly grasped the idea that I'm part of a kingdom at war and that everything and anything I do is to be ultimately for the glory of God? Have I grown in my knowledge of Christ and kingdom and my determination to making them my number one priority? Well, if you can say "yes" to any and all of the above, then you've had a spectacular year. Now if you can't say yes, there is always hope because guess what's facing us this week? A brand new year, a brand new start. Paul knows how to make the best use of time. He also knows what it's like to have a past that's full of regret. And he knew how to approach a future that was set down before him. If we're to be like Paul, we've got to set our sights on a year ahead, not on the year behind regardless of how well or poorly we felt we did. This is what Paul says in

*Philippians 3. He said: But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

Well 2020 is now behind us, so our challenge is to strain toward what is in front of us in the year 2021. And so what is it that we're going to strain towards in the year 2021? Paul says: I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. What is the prize that he's talking about? It's an ever-increasing ability to grow in Christ. So how do I make 2021 the year that I really, really grow in Christ? Well, before I tell you, let me just say what I've said before about what I consider to be my primary job as your pastor. If you want to boil it all down, I think it is my job to help you fall deeper and deeper in love with the Lord Jesus Christ because that changes everything. I mean, have you ever been truly in love like I was talking about at the very beginning of this message? You know you'll do anything, anything to please your mate. You know it's not a heartache or an effort to pour yourself out for the one that you deeply love. And the more that you know Christ, the more I guarantee it you will fall in love with him. Imagine loving Christ not just in theory but actually as much as you've loved the one who is the dearest in your life. I mean that is the power that the love of Christ brings. The love of Christ is

what empowers us. The love of Christ is what energizes us. The love of Christ is what gives us the ability to make any sacrifice for him and think that it's worthwhile. It's a price that we're willing to pay. You see, but for many of us the love of Christ is still a mystery. It's a mystery because we really don't know the Christ that we're worshiping. We just know that he died on the cross for us and for that we love him, but that's not nearly enough. I've talked before about the difference between loving Christ because he's useful and loving Christ because he's lovely. That was Jonathan Edwards' dilemma, he spoke about it. Most of us come to Christ to put it starkly and honestly, because we find him useful. We recognize that we are sinners, that we are caught up in the evil of the day and that by the grace of God we've come to understand that Christ has come to give us new life and to bear our sin. We love Christ because of his ultimate utility. He saved us from our sin. Well it's okay to start there but it's not okay to stay there. And the one thing that I can say about Christ is the more you learn about Christ, the deeper for him your love will be. The more your heart delights in Christ, the more delighted you will be in life itself. And the neat part of all of this is the more you delight in Christ, the more Christ-like you will become. The more the fruit of the Spirit, the more that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, meekness, gentleness, and self-control that marks who Christ was, the more that becomes a part of

you, the more eminently attractive you become. I mean God has so worked in our hearts that to the extent that we delight in Christ, God says I'll give you the delights of your heart. He says: *Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

So how do we walk expediently when it comes to making the best use of time? How do we personally go about the task of growing our love for Christ? Well God has some wisdom for us in his word. He has a suggestion in *Hebrews 10:23*. He says this: *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* So if you're looking to use your time in the best possible way in this next coming year, I suggest you pour your heart and your time into growing your knowledge of Christ through scripture and then putting that knowledge to work for what was so precious to Christ that he literally died for it and that is his church. The church is not -- it's not a building, it's not a denomination, it's not a marketing brand, it is a gathering of called out individuals who meet for the four reasons that the original church met. That's *Acts 2:42*, it says: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the*

*breaking of bread and the prayers.* Doctrine, fellowship, communion and prayer, that's what the church is about. Those are the means by which we grow our love for Christ, because you cannot love a Christ you don't know. And the way Christ wants you to grow in the knowledge and love for him is, one, through the apostle's teaching which is biblically based preaching; two, through fellowship, which is each of us sharpening each other as iron sharpens iron; three, through communion which is each of us corporately acknowledging our need to make Christ an intimate part of who we are, and finally through prayer. We are constantly trying to emphasize the notion that church is community and you can't have community with people you don't know beyond a three- or four-word greeting every Sunday morning. I mean this is a wicked world and its wickedness is extremely subtle. We need discernment and wisdom to walk carefully and well within that world, and for that we need the collective wisdom that we as a body share through the power of God's Holy Spirit. And that doesn't happen unless you make your effort to spend your time stirring up one another to love and good works. I mean Covid-19 is both a hindrance to and an opportunity for community. Our Wednesday night prayer meeting is available to anybody right in their own home through Zoom or at the church if you want to be there in person. I mean you can text, you can email, you can call one another. Practically speaking, we have been doing just that. I mean just this morning I've been in touch

with Elvia, with Elizabeth, with Darcey. I get lots and lots of texts and emails from folks who are sick and are not doing well and some who just need attention. But I believe we've gotten more and more skilled at that, every one of us in this body. And it can serve as well as we wait for the time that we are again gathered together as a body. But meanwhile we have a brand new year in front of us. I mean the times indeed are evil, but God is sovereign even over evil times. So *look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time.*

*Father, this has been quite a year. 2020 is a year that everyone will look back on and wonder if they could find anything good in it. And Lord, we know that you will draw good out of anything. We know that all things work together for good, even 2020. So I want to pray right now at the very end of 2020 as we enter into 2021 that you would give us the ability as a church to grow in our love for you, in our love for your word and our understanding of your word, in our understanding of the vocabulary that you use as you speak to us through scripture. I pray that you would give us the ability to unite even stronger this year as a body, that we would lift one another up, that we would sharpen one another as iron sharpens iron, and that you would give us the ability to see 2021 as a year of spectacular potential. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*