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**December 31, 2017**

**New Year's 2018**

**Ephesians 5:15-16**

**Prayer:** *Father, we do want to praise you, we want to thank you for the gift that you've given us of yet another year, a year that we can look back on and celebrate or regret or somewhere in between. We just want to again acknowledge that you are the giver of all gifts including our time, including our days here on earth and including your word. And Lord, this morning we want to again avail ourselves of that gift and of your Holy Spirit. We know without your Spirit these are just words on a page, they're meaningless. So we pray that your Spirit would accompany us and guide us as we open up your book and learn more about you, and again I pray that it would be of permanent value, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

It's strange how the calendar works. I was here exactly one year ago welcoming us to the very first day of 2017 and now I'm here on the very last day of 2017. And just like that another year is gone, it's just kind of zoomed by. And this morning I want to look at what is probably the most appropriate scripture for the first

day of 2018, it is *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 and they together make a very good New Year's resolution. It's first watch, watch how you walk; second, make the very best use of your time; and third, understand that these days are evil. Walk carefully and wisely, walk expediently, and walk discerningly. This morning I want to reverse Paul's statement a bit. I want to take the last thing and make it first and that last thing is to learn to walk with discernment. I mean if we want to walk wisely or expediently, we first learn -- we first need to learn to walk with discernment. Then we can walk carefully and wisely and finally we can walk expediently, making the best use of our time.

Well first discernment requires a practical understanding of what Paul meant when he said that the days are evil. I know most of us don't have a hard time understanding that evil is part of our existence. We know it, we're used to it, we see it, it's not any different than it's been since the fall of Adam. The end game has never changed since then. And like I said and I say it all the time, we are at war. We are at war and the kingdom of darkness wants nothing but our ultimate defeat and that's the end game.

That's the game that remains unchangeable. But what changes constantly is the tactics of evil and that's where discernment for believers is absolutely critical. Sin is something every one of us is going to spend the rest of our lives doing battle with and the closer we get to God, the more we become aware of our own personal wickedness but then the more we become aware of the incredible grace of God. As Tim Keller puts it, the gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope. And what Paul is referring to here in our text this morning in acknowledging that these days are evil is really the unique corporate cultural sins that define a particular time and place in history, our particular time and place in history. Paul had his cultural sins, we have ours. And the enemy's tactic for our culture's approach to evil is to so muddy the waters that the very idea of evil is up for grabs. I mean they say beauty is in the eye of the beholder; today so is evil. And the battle is over which idea of evil is going to prevail. I mean just this last week I read a quote by Rosie O'Donnell. That brings a laugh. She was very unhappy with the Republican tax plan. Paul Ryan was basically the architect, most of you know that of that plan, he put out a Christmas greeting about Jesus Christ being the reason for Christmas. He said this, he said: "At the end of each year no matter how short or long it may feel, there is always

Christmas waiting for us, that sense of wonder the shepherds felt when the angels appeared in the night sky to herald the birth of a Savior." And Rosie in response tweeted this, she said -- quote -- "Paul Ryan, don't talk about Jesus after what you just did to our nation. You will go straight to hell." You see, it's gotten to the point where differences in tax policy now mean you are set up for eternal condemnation. See, evil has become a negotiable topic. And you ask why. Paul tells us, he says, because the days are evil. There used to be a cultural consensus on what was good and what was evil but that distinction has disappeared. And now evil has been so trivialized, trivialized to the point where it's everywhere and when it's everywhere, it's nowhere. I mean it used to be that we argued and when we argued it was to say, okay, you're wrong, I'm right; I'm right, you're wrong. And what we argue now today, it's not like that at all. It's I'm right and you're evil. That's how arguments are all developed now. That's how fast and loose we have become with our understanding of what is good and what is evil. One man's good is another man's evil. It's exactly what Isaiah warned us about in *Isaiah 5:20*, he said: *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!* I mean that seems to be the order of the day today. You know it's been well said that the battle of our day is not between good and evil, it's between different ideas of what is good. I mean nobody

outside of cartoon characters acknowledges that they themselves are evil. So identifying genuine evil becomes an incredibly important matter of discernment. I'm sure that Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot and people like Margaret Sanger, they all believe that the particular evil that they engaged in was actually a good. And that's just what our culture does as well. In fact it often eliminates an evil by turning it into a good. Why? Well, Paul told us *because the days are evil*.

A classic example is recent article *CBS News* ran, about Iceland's health care system. And they repeated that Iceland is now leading the world in -- quote -- "eliminating Down syndrome births." They didn't eliminate Down syndrome through some form of sophisticated genetic engineering or medicine, they eliminate it by killing virtually any baby that tested positive for the genetic marker that might indicate Downs. I mean they've eliminated the disability by killing anybody with the disability then they proudly state that they've eliminated the disability. I mean now murder of the unborn can actually be promoted as a corporate good, as a medical advance. And by the way, the Icelandic government forces nobody. I mean they just mandate that everyone must get tested and the culture does the rest. As an Icelandic state counselor stated -- quote -- "We don't look at abortion as a murder. We look at it as a thing that we ended. We ended a possible life that may have had a huge

complication, preventing suffering for the child and for the family. And I think that is more right than seeing it as a murder -- that's so black and white. Life isn't black and white. Life is grey." Evil isn't black and white. Evil is grey. Why? Because the days are evil. As long as we can paint life as grey, we can wind up calling the evil of taking life a good of eliminating a disability. That's how confused our culture's understanding of evil is. The evil is no longer objective, it is now firmly in the eyes of the beholder.

Well, what if I told you that there's lots of people out there who identify as Christian who just might be seeing you as evil? I mean because the days are evil, this definition for evil is, as I said, up for grabs. I mean there are many in the pro-choice movement who see pro-lifers as people who want to deny women their basic essential rights and freedoms and these folks in their eyes are evil. If you believe that marriage is to be between a man and a woman, there's certainly going to be a percentage of people, many who identify as Christian, who see you as basically holding down and discriminating against gay folks and therefore evil. I mean if you think kneeling down during the national anthem is an inappropriate way of promoting racial reconciliation, there's going to be a percentage of people who see you as evil and vice versa. You see, the Icelandic counselor's view seemed to have won the day,

life isn't black and white. Evil isn't black and white. Life is grey. It's mushy. Because the days are evil. And now so is the term "evangelical." I mean the term "evangelical" used to mean a commitment to the Bible as revealed truth and a desire to share that truth with others. "Evangelical" is now seen in many quarters as evil. I mean it's become a common theme today that evangelicals are basically just old white conservatives who are desperately trying to hold on to power because they see the culture all around them shifting and that these folks are willing to support this lecherous egomaniac as a president because they don't really care about anything other than holding on to the power they used to have. Is that the way it is? Is that the way evangelicals are? I mean for many folks the term "evangelical" has become so loaded they no longer want to identify with it. And within the evangelical tent, so to speak, there's yet another divide. I mean, there's the more liberal churches who are accused of being far more concerned about giving people food, clothing and shelter than they do the gospel; and then there's the conservatives on the other hand who are accused of ignoring physical needs just in order to pursue the saving of souls. The evangelical church is also a product of this culture as well, so we too now define the other side as evil. Both sides are very happy to quote scripture at you. And like I said, evil today is in the eye of the beholder. Hence the need for walking with discernment.

Where does discernment come from? Well, God says we have to walk wisely and carefully. He says: *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.* So how do we apply wisdom to what God thinks of as evil because God's view is really the only view that counts here. Well first of all, when it comes to the opinions of others, particularly of other Christians, I would invoke the Peter principle. Not the one that says that folks rise to their own level of incompetency but a different Peter principle altogether. At one point the resurrected Christ was meeting with his disciples and as he met, he had a dialogue with Peter. And in the ensuing conversation Christ reveals to Peter how he, Peter, is going to be martyred. Peter then sees the apostle John and he asks Jesus the following question. He says this in *John 21:21*, he says: *When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" And Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."* Now the key words in that dialogue is the phrase *"What is that to you?"* What Jesus is essentially telling Peter to do is mind your own business. This has nothing to do with you. And that's good advice for us. You see, God has a unique plan for each and every one of us and it doesn't behoove us to look to our left or our right or up or down or behind us or in front of us for our cues or our criticisms. I mean each of us is going to stand alone before the throne of Christ and give an account of our lives and no one's going to be there but



Christ in me, so that it behooves my Christian life in the here and now to understand why I'm doing what I'm doing for God's sake and not for any other sake. It is far better to worry about pleasing Christ than any other person.

So how do we decide to apply God's wisdom to the evil of our day? Well, we go to the source, we go to the scripture, and we remember that we are at war. Like I said, the enemy's tactics have not changed that much since the Garden of Eden and there God made his will very, very plain and there we get to see how the enemy, how his tactics work, how he used those tactics to twist the enemy's -- to twist God's plain truth. This is *Genesis 2:15*, it says: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."* That was God's clear command, couldn't get clearer than that. But here's Satan's response. This is *Genesis 3:1-4*. It says: *Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"* You see, Satan did then what he still does today. First he questions God's intent, then he's going to question God's authority, then he's going to defy that authority. He says: *And*

*the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die." Well, the wisdom of scripture makes clear that things haven't changed much since the Garden of Eden. Satan still starts out questioning God's intent at first and then he questions God's authority and then he challenges Eve to reject that authority and you know what he wants her to do? He wants her to make up her own version of what is good and her own version of what is evil. You need to be autonomous in that. And just like Eve, he goes after us. I mean folks would love to think that this is new and daring and different making up your own rules about what is right and wrong but the pattern is as old as the Garden of Eden. At the very bottom of Israel's rebellion there was a time when they had utterly rejected God, much in the way that folks today reject God, and God's response was to say in *Judges 21: In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* That's right where we are today. I mean suffice it to say that the enemy of our souls wants to attack God and everything about God the very same way. And of necessity that makes us as the only creatures who bear God's image his primary target. The days are evil because the enemy never rests and he's constantly on the attack. Our text says: *Look carefully then how you walk, not as**

*unwise but as wise* because the enemy tailors his evil uniquely to each culture. The tactics that apply to our day and age and specifically to our culture are tied in to us and not to Europe, not to Asia, not to China or not to other epics in history as well. And I've mentioned before what our unique cultural approach is to attack God's image in three primary areas: To attack God's image in its design, to attack God's image in its diversity and to attack God's image in its development. We see the attack on God's design in today's battlefield that's known as gender. And whether it's homosexual marriage or LGBTQ rights or transgendered students or gender fluidity or any of the other issues that define gender today, they all go back to an attack on the basic premise that scripture is clear about, that is that God designed man and woman in a binary way. *Male and female he made them.* That design goes across the entire range of all of God's living creation, from plants to birds to fish to mammals to us. And so today it's a matter of pitting God's binary design against our own autonomous version of the same design, against a manufactured gender fluidity that insists now that there's over fifty different types of gender depending on what you choose to be. Well, here we see the enemy's pattern. First question God's word, then defy it by creating a new pattern based on my autonomy. Well, did God say that there's only two genders? Pretty much he did. In *Genesis 1:27* it says: *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created*

*them; male and female he created them.* Well, did God say that marriage is supposed to be between a man and a woman? Oh, yes, he did. In *Genesis 2:24* it says: *Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.* So make no mistake about it, God's creation order for life and for marriage is binary: male and female. You see, the enemy's calling card about gender is the same confusion and deception that he successfully used against Eve. And what he really wants is for us to act autonomously. What he really wants is for us to make up our own good and our own evil. It's just what we see in our culture today. We have a huge advantage over Eve. We have God's written word. Walking wisely and with discernment also includes understanding the confusion that the rest of this world is saddled with. I mean they have a chorus of conflicting truth claims based on experience that goes back less than a decade. I mean ten years ago LGBTQ was just a random group of letters. I mean today it now rules the cultural roost. We've been given in scripture the timeless truth in all of its simplicity and it is a truth that has stood the test of centuries. That's not a truth that's supposed to be used as a cudgel or a bludgeon or a club but as a bedrock lining of our understanding. God is asking us in our text this morning to look carefully and wisely, understanding that the days are evil, and that includes understanding how that evil plays itself out uniquely in our culture. And the folks caught up

in the gender issues of our cultures are really victims. They're victims of an enemy and they don't even know that they're victims.

We're facing sin issues that never even existed a decade ago.

There's no recent precedent for this evil. Reaching out with Christ's love to those caught up in this snare requires also a wisdom that is far beyond most of us. But the good news is again, that God promises us that wisdom if we but ask for it. *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives generously without finding fault and it will be given.* And along with that wisdom, the compassion that understands that but for the grace of God, any one of us could be that same kind of victim caught up in that same kind of sin. That compassion compels us to seek the best possible way to address this evil.

And the second area that our culture is so caught up in is the attack on the diversity of God's design. We call that racism. We seem to have gone backwards when it comes to the issue of race. And just like in the other areas, there's nothing but confusion and deception all sung by a chorus of conflicting voices that range from skinheads to Black Lives Matter. What the enemy is seeking to do here is to diminish the value of God's own image based on the race that it's placed in. I mean even the premise is demonic. *Revelation 5:9 says: By your blood you ransomed people for God*

*from every tribe and language and people and nation. I mean it's God who tells us in no uncertain terms that every tribe, tongue and nation has been ransomed by the blood of Christ and that all will give honor and glory to him. And God says be wise and discerning when it comes to this evil. And once again we see the enemy's pattern of deception and defiance. What is unique about slavery is that scripture was used to justify it at the beginning and scripture was again used to bring it to an end. What it really proves is that the enemy is quite comfortable twisting scripture and quoting scripture to suit his end. We are at least able to address this issue from a biblical standpoint, and once again we find that God's truth is remarkably simple. He says in Galatians 3:26: So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

So we look at the second point, the second point is that God's image is attacked in terms of its diversity, it's been attacked in terms of its design, its diversity; and finally we recognize this ongoing attack that has never stopped, it's on image of God developing in its mother's womb. You see when autonomy becomes your goal, when you seek to break away from God's rule, then any

level of human depravity becomes possibility. As Judges says: *In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* Problem is from days of old human beings have constantly redefined the "right in their own eyes" downward. And time and time again if you look at the history, if you look at the Old Testament, you'll see that it descended to a level where human sacrifices would literally become acceptable. I mean as sophisticated as we are, as supposedly caring and empathetic as we have become, we are a culture wholesale caught up in the slaughter of children who are nothing more than sacrifices offered up to a God of convenience, perfection or mental health. I mean we've done a really good job of covering up what really happens in abortion; after all, it's just a medical procedure. It's almost never associated with something as vile as human sacrifice. And we've all become the victim of complete indifference to it. You know, when Planned Parenthood was exposed last year actively promoting and marketing the sale of infant hearts and livers and lungs, body parts that they collected as a part of their business of killing children, when word of that got out, there was outrage, but it wasn't at the sellers of the body parts. It was at the people who went undercover and discovered what was going on. They're the ones that are facing jail time even now. By and large our culture just yawned, went about its business. Nothing to see here. Move on. *Because the times are evil.* And even though there's been a massive

and massively successful effort to hide what really takes place in abortion, once again God knows and God states in his word in *Proverbs 24: Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, "But we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay everyone according to what they have done?* And I thank God that we have a God of forgiveness. I thank God we have a God who will forgive any sin including the sin of abortion. But this really is how the days shape up in terms of the evil that we face today. As I said, the end game remains the same; it's only the tactics that change.

So our answer to God's statement of the days are evil is a sad but resounding amen. Our unique evil happens to be the first world variety, it's gender, it's racism, it's abortion. In other places around the world, evil's different, the tactic's different and the response of believers differs. There's human trafficking, there's child labor, there's war, there's displaced refugees, that's just some of the evil that takes place usually away from our shores. It's easy to get overwhelmed with it but it's also easy to miss that God has all of this evil pegged right from the beginning. And God is still at work and his kingdom is still advancing despite 2,000 years of active attempts to squash it. You know, the darkness may be able to squeeze out the light of human goodness but



it will never, never have the power to defeat the supernatural light of God and his word. And so we go back again and again to that word which is timeless and we apply it to the particular evil of our day, our time and our culture.

God 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.* And so we walk discerningly when we see the evil of our day as the same demand for autonomy that makes everyone do what is right in their own eyes rather than God's, we walk carefully and wisely when we apply God's timeless answers to today's evil days; and finally we walk expediently -- quote -- "*making the best use of time.*" You know, as you look back over this last year, ask yourself if you are pleased with how you made use of your time. Ask yourself have I drawn closer to Christ this year? Have I firmly grasped the idea that I'm in a kingdom that is at war and that everything and anything that I do is to be ultimately for the glory of Christ and kingdom? Have I grown my knowledge in Christ and kingdom and my determination to make them the number one priority in my life? If you can say "yes" to any or all the above, then you've had a spectacular year. If you can't say "yes," well there's always hope because right in front of us beginning tomorrow is a brand new year. Paul knows how to make the best use of time and he also knows what it is like to have a past that's full of regret. He

knew how to approach a future set out in front of him and if we're to be like Paul, we've got to set our sights on the year ahead, not the year behind regardless of how well or poorly we felt we did. Paul says in *Philippians 3:13*: *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.* I can't think of a more appropriate New Year's verse than these words of Paul in his letter to the Philippians. 2017 is now behind us. And our challenge is to strain toward what is in front of us in the year 2018.

So what is it that we're going to strain toward in the year 2018? Paul says: *I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.* So what is that prize that he's talking about? Well, the prize is the increasing ability to grow in Christ. So how can I make the year 2018 the year that I really grow in Christ? Well you know, before I tell you, let me just say what I've said before about what I consider to be my number one job as your pastor. I think it's my number one job to help you fall deeper and deeper in love with Jesus Christ. That's my job. You see, if you've ever truly been in love, you know that you would do anything to please your mate. If you've ever been truly in love, you know that it's not an heartache or an effort to pour yourself out for those whom you deeply love. That's what makes serving Christ effortless when

you're deeply in love with him. And the more you know Christ, the more I guarantee it, you will fall in love with him. I mean, imagine loving Christ as much as you loved your first love. That's the power that the love of Christ brings. I mean it's the love of Christ that empowers us, it's the love of Christ that energizes us, it's love of Christ that makes any sacrifice for God and kingdom seem well worth any price we have to pay. For many of us, though, I think the love of Christ is a mystery. I mean I talked before about the difference of loving Christ because he's useful as opposed to loving Christ because he's lovely. Most of us come to Christ, to put it starkly and honestly, because we find him useful, of ultimate use. I mean we recognize that we are sinners, that we're caught up in the evil of the day and by the grace of God we come to understand that Christ has come to give us new life and to bear our sin. We love Christ for his ultimate utility. He saved us from our sin. It's okay to start there but you can't stay there. I mean the one thing I can say about Christ is the more you learn of Christ, the deeper your love of him is going to be. The more your heart delights in this Christ, the more delighted you will be in life itself. And the neat part is the more you delight in Christ, the more Christ-like you will become, the more the fruit of the Spirit, that love, that joy, that peace, that patience, that kindness, that goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control that belonged to Christ will belong to you. 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 in *Psalm 37: Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.* God so wants us to delight in Christ.

So how do we walk expediently? I mean when it comes to making the best use of our time, how do we practically go about the task of growing our love for Christ? Well, let me give you a suggestion. God says this in *Hebrews 10:23*, he says: *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 it is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.* See, if you're looking to use your time in the best possible way in this coming year, then I suggest that you pour your heart and your time into what was so precious to Christ that he literally died for it, and that's his church. I mean the church is not a building, it's not a denomination, it's not a marketing brand. It's a gathering of called-out individuals who meet for four reasons. The four reasons that the original church met in *Acts 2:42* says: *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* Those are the four things: Doctrine, fellowship, communion, and prayer. That's what the church is supposed to be

about. And those are the means that we use to grow our love for Christ, because you can't love a Christ that you don't know. And the way Christ wants you to grow in the knowledge and love for him is first through the apostles' teaching, which is biblically based preaching and teaching which you get in the church. And then through fellowship, which is each of us sharpening each other as iron sharpens iron that you get in the church. It's through communion, which is each of us corporately confessing and acknowledging our need to make Christ an intimate part of who we are and that can't happen outside of the church. And lastly through corporate prayer which we've been looking at for the last five weeks in which we have seen amazing things happening on Wednesday nights. God is growing that right in front of our eyes. Tonight we are gathering for food and fellowship as we've done every single New Year's Eve for years. It's really just an opportunity to get to know people better, to kind of get to know the people you're going to be spending eternity with. We are constantly trying to emphasize the notion that church is community and you can't have community with people that you don't know beyond a three- or four-word greeting on Sunday morning. So if you want to know how to expediently use your time, commit your time this year to growing the community of your church. I mean we've seen this morning, this is a wicked world and its wickedness is extremely subtle. You 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. That doesn't happen until you first make the effort to spend your time *stirring one another up to love and good works*, and it starts by not neglecting to meet together. So why not come out and join us tonight as we *look carefully then how we walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil*. Let's pray.

*Father God, I do thank you for your word, I thank you for the wonderful resource that we have as we are in a sea of different opinions as to what is what especially when it comes to evil. I just thank you that we have your word, your timeless word. I thank you for the grace, the peace, the power and the wisdom that it contains. And Lord, this morning I just pray for each and every one of us that as we look to this year ahead, we might see the incredible value that you placed in your church, your bride, the organism that you died for. Lord, give us a heart and a passion to grow this church in terms of its community, in terms of its ability to link arms, link hearts, link minds, and links souls and together by the power of the Holy Spirit to grow in our love and our understanding of who you are, that we may serve you in a way that brings honor and glory to you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*