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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**December 31, 2023**

**New Year's Resolutions**

**Ephesians 5:15-16**

**Prayer:** *Again Father, I thank you for your grace, I thank you for your goodness, I thank you for the gifts that you have poured out on us this Christmas season, not the least of which the fact that we're still able to gather and meet. It's a gift and a privilege and we thank you for it. And Lord, again, as we're going to open up your word this morning, I pray for the gift of your Holy Spirit, that you'd guide us, that you'd accompany us, that you'd make this of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, for the last few years, I've used the occasion of this upcoming new year to examine a scripture that says as good a new year resolution as you're going to find. And I've basically looked at the same scripture each year since 2015 and each year kind of found a different nuance of understanding based on the circumstances that had presented itself this particular year.

So this year once again I want to give you a compilation of some of the things I've touched on in those other messages, just sort of a

best of approach to this new year and I want to focus on one particular scripture which is *Ephesians 5:15-16*. It 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.*

Well, there's three different commands in this scripture. First, it says, watch that you walk wisely; second, it says, make the very best use of your time; and third, understand that the days are evil. So we're looking at basically a new year's resolution and the first thing we want to work on in 2024 is a resolution to walk wisely.

I mean, has there ever been a time when all of us needed wisdom more than we need it today? I mean, when marriage and sexuality and relationships have been turned essentially upside down, you know you need wisdom. And when many of the young people you know reach college age and kind of walk away from their faith, you know you need wisdom. And when the only absolute truth your culture now accepts is the statement that there's no such thing as absolute truth, well, you know you need wisdom.

So first we want to ask the question that I've asked many, many times, and the question is: What is wisdom? Wisdom, like joy and like patience, it doesn't yield to a simple English definition.

And like with joy and like with patience we need to look to the scripture to find out just what wisdom really is.

You see, most folks confuse wisdom with intelligence and they're not one and the same. Biblical wisdom is not just the accumulation of knowledge about things biblical even though the Bible is our source of biblical wisdom. I mean, you've often heard me use the simple two-word definition of what biblical wisdom really is but even that needs some further explanation and 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."

Well, that practical side of moral goodness is the power that God offers us through wisdom. So practically speaking, I've said wisdom is the power to perceive the word, the world, and the kingdom of God with a supernatural ability. I mean, it's basically the ability to connect the dots from three different sources. One, from what the Bible teaches; two, from what the world is shouting at us; and three, from how the kingdom of God expects us to

respond, and how it expects us to respond in a way that points directly to and from the mind of God. That's how we define wisdom.

So part one of our task involves making our resolution to live wisely a normal part of our everyday lives. Again the scripture says: *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise.* So walking wisely is the place that first starts with the word of God. I mean, let me tell you how God showed me that in my own life.

In 1971 I had just graduated from college, I was about to marry the most beautiful, intelligent and kind woman I'd ever met. I thought I was literally on top of the world. And *James 1:5* says: "*If any of you lacks wisdom,*" well I did, I did lack that wisdom but it was of no concern to me. I had no need for God's wisdom because I was one of the smartest people I had ever met. And I thought I was brilliant. I had no idea, I had no idea whatsoever that I was a living, breathing definition of what the Bible says a fool is. I mean, we think a fool is, you know, he's a knucklehead, he's a nitwit, he's a coconut, as Steve would say; somebody can't find his way out of a paper bag. God's word describes a fool very, very differently. *Psalm 14* says this, it says: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."*

Well, those words and that idea actually defined me. I didn't just say that in my heart, I said it to anyone who would listen. I was extremely impressed with me and my opinions. You see, I had decided if there was a God, he had to be just like I had envisioned him. And when he wasn't, I just -- I concluded he didn't exist. Nevermind that my god wasn't God at all, I mean, it was basically an idol that I had constructed inside my own head. You know, it's something that just about every non-believer does. And, you know, my god, he loved everyone and my god judged no one and my god didn't even believe in hell. I was as guilty as the next person of saying basically "my god" and you just fill in whatever blank you want. 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 lack wisdom*" is that you just might not have it. It never occurred to me.

But you know, scripture addresses that as well. This is what it says in *Proverbs 12*. It says: *The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.* *Proverbs 28:26* says: *Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.*

So 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 that I'd been exposed to before, and that's understandable because God's wisdom is antithetical to human wisdom, I mean, oftentimes it's directly 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.*

And so through the miracle of God's saving grace, the foolishness of this idea that God himself would become a man, that he would live a perfect life and that he would offer that life up on a cross so that I by faith could claim his righteousness as my own and stand before a perfectly holy God worthy of heaven, well 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.

And again, *1 Corinthians 1:25* says: *"For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."* And so it seemed to me every time I opened up the Bible God was exposing me to insights and ways of thinking that I had never even thought of before. Dots were being connected that had never connected before and they were all coming from this printed word on the pages of a book that I had had nothing but scorn for before. I mean, I'd spent my first 24 years gleaning as much of this 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 that word.

There he says this in *1 Corinthians 3:18*, he says: *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."*

So I've spent the next fifty years studying the wisdom that God has given us in his word and after all that time I've learned that all of that wisdom that I've learned could fit in a thimble with room to spare compared to the vastness of the wisdom that's there. I mean, it's God's wisdom coalesced into a printed word. But that doesn't mean that it's available to anyone, because it's not. You see, this Bible, this word of God is a closed book to anyone who doesn't have the wisdom of God to understand it. You don't get that wisdom from training or genetics or discipline. The amazing part is the only way you can get that wisdom is by asking for it.

This wisdom is not like chemistry or physics or literature or even theology, I mean, some of the most brilliant theological minds there are in places like Yale or Harvard or Princeton, they're actually hopelessly blind, deaf and dumb when it comes to

understanding the simple truths of the gospel. And it's sad to say, all of those institutions were at one time centuries ago, they were bastions of truth and wisdom having been established to pursue biblical wisdom. Well, today they're all known for their "isms," racism, plagiarism, anti-Semitism. 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.

You've got to understand, 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. That's not my word, those are Jesus' words himself. This is what he said in *Matthew 11*. He said: *"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."* You see, it's childlike weakness that opens us up to his wisdom.

You see, if anyone lacks wisdom, all he has to do is ask. And there's that scripture in James, I repeat it virtually every day as a prayer. It's taken from *James 1:5*: *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.* And you know if, if any of you lacks wisdom is James' way of stating the first part of a conditional clause that's basically stating the obvious. James is

assuming all of us lack wisdom. But he says here the requirement to receive it, it seems all too easy, he says, really, all you have to do is ask. Actually there's a second requirement in the very next verse and it's that requirement that requires me to believe that I actually have the wisdom I'm asking for. The whole verse says this: *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 really two different requirements. Number one, you have to ask; and number two, you have to really believe that he's going to give it to you. And it never ceases to amaze me that folks don't do this every single day. You want the best use of the first 30 seconds of the day, this is it. I mean, there's not a day that goes by that I do not ask God for wisdom repeatedly, and he gives it to me repeatedly. And you know why? Because I ask for it.

I mean I'm confident I've received wisdom from God not because of me; because I believe God's promise, I know that I lack it, I know that I need it, I know if I ask God he's going to give it and so I'm confident I have it. I mean, we're trying to look carefully

how we walk, we're trying to walk wisely. Again, *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 the wisest way to do that is by accessing the wisdom, the wisdom that God has given us in the Bible.

We lack wisdom in the most critical thing and that is in understanding God's word. You see, scripture is really the language that God uses to communicate the wisdom from heaven to earth 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 that you possess.

And here's how: See, God tells us repeatedly, he's trying to get it into our heads, he says: *"My ways are not your ways."* He says, I don't think like you think. And the Bible gives us insight as to how God thinks and oftentimes it's not at all the way we think, it's always better and deeper and wiser. And here's how we access that wisdom personally. I said this many, many times, I said, God's word is basically like a master program and each verse of each book is like a file that you download into your spiritual hard drive. And it's that source of knowledge that God's Holy Spirit draws on to give you personal infinite wisdom. You can't learn a foreign language without studying its vocabulary and the Bible is

the vocabulary that God uses to speak to us. The more limited your understanding of the Bible, the more limited your vocabulary in learning how God speaks. The more scripture you're familiar with, the easier it is for the Holy Spirit to connect the dots between scriptures to give you insight as to what it means to live not as unwise but as wise.

This is the end of the year. This is the perfect time to begin or to renew a daily content with scripture. For years I've used one of the through the Bible in a year bibles, I use the MacArthur One Year Bible and, you know, it's just a discipline of putting those files inside your hard drive. Sometimes you find yourself looking for material you can't imagine you'd have any use for, like regulations concerning skin conditions in Leviticus or the genealogies of patriarchs, but then God says this in *1 Timothy 3*, he says: *All scripture -- 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 God does use every single part of his word to communicate truth globally but even more importantly, personally. You see, when I'm looking, when I'm looking for God's wisdom for a particular issue, I often hear

God speaking to me not audibly, but scripturally. As I'm praying through an issue, many times a particular scripture or scriptures that bear specifically on that issue will just pop into my head. That's God's Holy Spirit communicating to me through his word, and it makes sense the more scripture I have command of, the easier it is for God to communicate. It's not magic, but it's certainly supernatural.

Just this week I was reading *World Magazine* and I saw a perfect example of just how God uses, just how this works. It came up in an article I was reading. This is Lynn Vincent, she's a columnist for *World Magazine*. She was writing about the wisdom of scripture in a column she had titled "Seek It Like Silver." This is her describing her experience of how God uses scripture this way.

This is what she wrote. She said: "I remember exactly where I was when the Word of the Lord came to me: I was washing dishes. It was almost exactly two years ago when my telephone rang. A prominent friend called to ask me to take sides in an argument—publicly. It wasn't my argument, and I'd only heard his side of the story. But he was a dear friend who had racked up a track record of being right about most things. So I said yes and hung up the phone. Not long after, I was scrubbing a plate in the kitchen sink when the Holy Spirit whispered to my heart: 'Whoever

meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.' The words of Proverbs 26:17 lit up in my heart, like a sunbeam breaking through clouds. I put down my sponge, picked up my phone, and called my friend back. He was wise, no doubt, but not as wise as the wisest man who ever lived. Quoting Solomon, I recused myself from the argument and that was that. But I might not have, had it not been for what has become a 15-year daily diet of wisdom literature."

You see what she's saying there is Lynn's hard drive had been filled with this wisdom literature of scripture and the files were just there for the Holy Spirit to use so God could communicate right there while she's at the sink washing dishes. You see, it takes effort and discipline to study the Bible, but the reward is God's own wisdom. And the more scripture that you have in your heart and mind, the better to individually perceive that wisdom.

Let's say somebody's said or done something that's really upsetting, and I'm just tempted to blast him in response, and I sit down and suddenly I hear in my spirit *James 1:19*. It says: *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*

You see what's going on there, the chances are very good that God is speaking to me through his word. And what he's saying is, "Slow down, Tom, listen carefully to what is being said. Do not respond in anger." You see, perceiving the wisdom of God requires wisdom itself. You know, folks have used scripture to pick horses in horse racing and stocks in the stock market, all kinds of genuinely bad ideas because folks think of scripture more like magic than God's will communicating itself to man. But again, you have to have the vocabulary in order to communicate the exercise of wisdom.

I've said it before, think of something simple like cooking, like recipes, you know, if I said, "Braise the diced onions until they're completely caramelized," most of you who are into cooking are going to understand exactly what I mean, what I'm talking about. People like myself who basically don't know how to boil water, they hear those words, they have no idea what they mean.

But it's similar with your knowledge of scripture, I mean, the more familiar you are with God's word, the more familiar you are with his concepts, the more God can communicate to you through his word. You know, braising and dicing and caramelizing, they make perfect sense to cooks. And just like justify, sanctify and glorify makes sense to believers. Or not. 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.*

God's just calling us to *look carefully at how we walk, not as unwise but as wise*, but then he further defines that wisdom by saying part two of our New Year's resolution. He says: *Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.* Okay. How do we do that? You know, time is unique, time is the only commodity that virtually every one of us receives in absolutely equal amounts. I mean, at the end of the day literally we've all been given the exact same 24 hours. And so God is charging us to make the best use of those hours, and he's not silent about how he wants us to do that.

You know, scripture describes three different places that all of us can be with regard to time. We can be in the past, we can be in the present or we can be in the future. But you know, two of those are just reference points or stopping points that are okay to visit as long as we don't make plans to stay there, and those places are the past and the future. God says certainly we can learn from the past and we can certainly prepare for the future but he expects us to live in the present. And we need to look into those three different places in time to see what God's idea of making the best use of time is all about, because God has a lot to say about living in the past, the present or the future.

You know, God tells us something about living in the future because this is the place where we believers, it's where we place our hope. You know, biblical hope is not wishful thinking. It's instead, 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 yeah, I know it's a cliché but it's a cliché that's based in absolute truth. The secret is being able to joyfully anticipate the future and that's rooted in understanding that God is firmly and absolutely in charge of it. There's unlimited power in having the understanding even some of the worst circumstances in the world are not going to stop you, and that comes from trusting Jesus.

Listen to how Jesus put this in *Matthew 6*. He says: *"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."*

Jesus asked us to look at the obvious signs of God's sovereign care even for the humbler parts of his creation, and then he asked if we're willing to believe that God cares for us more than he cares about birds and flowers. And so what he says is you can look to the future with joy and hope not because it's a nice thing to do but because it's the key that God gives us to help us survive.

And the other key that God gives us with regard to time can allow us to accept repeatedly a future that looks like an invitation to despair and he does it by visiting that other place in time that God calls us to visit at moments like that and that's the past. I mean, literally hundreds of times in scripture we find God commanding us to go backwards, to go visit the past. He calls us to remember. In *1 Chronicles 16* it 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 what David said in *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.*

Now we know David had many a miry bog that he found himself in and he's describing a time of patient waiting and then being lifted out of that bog and set on a rock so much so that he now has a song of praise for his God. Think about how that relates to me, I mean, I can think of a half dozen or so miry bogs that I've been in in my life. Some of them required far more patience than I thought I could muster but in each case I remember God carefully lifting me out and setting my feet on that rock.

You know, many a times I've spoken about God's miraculous provision that God got me through absolutely impossible situations, but each time he has, I've remembered -- well, at least most of the times I've remembered -- that when things get dicey and when they get dicey all over again, I just go back to remembering those things

that God has done in my particular past that enabled me to trust that he would get me through it again.

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 basically making a deposit in that account, he's giving us something to remember, something that he wants you to draw on when things begin to look bleak. It doesn't have to be some spectacular miracle. More often than not it's simply God letting you know he's got his fingerprints on your life, that you're not alone. And each time he does you have one more example of his faithfulness to bank on.

Last time I gave you the example from Mike and Cindy Gingerich because it's an excellent example of these little miracles that God likes to do. These were our missionaries in the Philippines. And once Mike was asked if he had any stories to tell about God lifting him up. And he shared with us that he had been struggling with whether or not they were -- this big question they were wrestling with as a family, should I move my family to the Philippines and go full time into mission work. And he and his family were living in the midwest at the time and it was the middle of winter, they were stuck in a snowy, icy place. Mike realized that they were missing something absolutely vital to their family, they were missing

toilet paper. The family was completely out of it. And the weather was too nasty to go out and buy some. Mike said that that simple need put him in the middle of a very deep funk because he thought to himself, how am I going to trust God's going to take care of my family all the way in the Philippines if I'm stuck here in the midwest with this simple need that he can't even address.

He says he's looking out the window and it's a stormy, nasty day. And as he's looking out the window, he sees the mailman trudging up to his mailbox and he's leaving a package. And so he goes trudging out to the mailbox and there in it is this one package that consists of one roll of toilet paper. It was a free sample. Now, you can certainly make the claim that well, that was just an interesting coincidence; but Mike said he knew better. To Mike it said everything he needed to know about God's desire to meet his family's needs. That happened many years ago but, you know, Mike still teared up when he explained that little miracle that God had done in his life. And that's why it's incredibly important to build up that celestial bank account by doing just what God says to do, to remember, just to remember things that God has done for you in the past.

And practically speaking, having something as simple as a prayer journal or a place where you just kind of jot things down God has

done in your life can be very helpful, especially when things are looking bleak. I've got my own personal stories about my failed septic system and about the time God provided a car when ours finally died and other similar issues, and they were a powerful means of pulling me out of that same miry clay and setting my feet on that rock once again when things seemed to be 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 in order to give us hope for the future so we live that way in the present.

Again, part two of our resolution 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.* Okay. So how do we make the best use of the time? Well, first of all, how about scheduling a specific time for prayer or reading or 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?

I mean you have to understand something with this. This is not for God's sake, this is for our sake. You see, we don't carve out time for God so that he'd look down at us and just like us a little bit more because we're doing that. You have to understand, God can't love you any more than he already does. Because the love that he

first expressed to you was the maximum that he could express. *John 13* 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.* And the end for Jesus was the cross. So you can't think of this as some kind of way to earn brownie points with God because you already got them if you're a child of God. Like I said, this isn't for his sake, it's for ours. Our greatest joy and our deepest pleasure is knowing Christ. We just don't fully realize that yet.

As you look back over this last year you just need just to ask yourself, are you pleased with how you used the time that God has given you? Have you drawn closer to Christ this year? Have I firmly grasped the idea that I'm part of a kingdom at war and that anything and everything I do is ultimately to be for the glory of God? Have I grown my knowledge of Christ and kingdom in my determination to make them my number one priority? Well, if you can say yes to any or all of the above, well, you've had a spectacular year. If you can't say yes, here's the good news. Right in front of us today is a brand new year just waiting for us.

You know, the apostle Paul, Paul knows well how to make the best use of time. He also knows what it's like to have a past that was full of regrets and he also knows exactly how to approach a future

that was set out before him. So we want to be like Paul, we want to set our sights on the year ahead, not on the year behind regardless of how well or poorly we felt that we did. This is what Paul says in *Philippians 3:13*. He says: *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.*

2023 is, one more day, it's officially behind us. And so our challenge is to strain towards what is in front of us in the year 2024. So what is it we're going to -- what is it that we're going to strain for in that year? Well Paul says, *"I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it."* He talks about the prize. The prize that he's talking about is an ever-increasing ability to grow in Christ.

Okay. So how do I make the year 2024 the year I really, really grow in Christ? And before -- before I tell you that, let me just tell you an incredibly important part of that because I have to tell you what I consider my primary job as your pastor. It's my job to help you fall deeper and deeper in love with the Lord Jesus Christ because that changes everything.

Have you ever been truly in love? Have you ever been just

overwhelmingly out of your mind just in love? You know you would do anything to please your mate. It's not a heartache, it's not an effort to pour yourself out for those who you deeply, deeply love. And, you know, the more you know Christ, the more I guarantee you you will fall in love with him.

Imagine loving Christ not just in theory but actually 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 the love of Christ that makes any sacrifice for God and kingdom seem well worth any price we have to pay. But I fear for many of us, the love of Christ is an absolute mystery. It's a mystery because we don't really know the Christ that we worship. And we know he died on the cross for us, and for that, we love him. But that's not nearly enough.

I've mentioned before the difference that Tim Keller pointed out between loving Christ because he's useful and loving Christ because he's lovely. Most of us come to Christ, to put it starkly, to put it honestly, because we find him useful. We recognize that we're sinners, we recognize that we've been caught up in the evil of the day and that 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 sins. I mean, 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 of Christ, the deeper your love for him will grow. The more your heart delights in Christ, the more you will be delighted in life itself. And the neat part of this is the more you delight in Christ, the more Christ-like you become. The more the fruit of the spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, meekness, gentleness, self-control, all of those parts of Christ becomes part of who you are and the more immensely attractive you become. God has so worked in our hearts that to the extent that we delight in Christ, God says I'll give you those delights. *Psalm 37* says: *Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

Okay. So how do we walk expediently 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, God has a suggestion in *Hebrews 10*. This is what he says. 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 is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

You see, if you're looking to use your time in the best possible way this coming here, I suggest you pour your heart and your time into growing your knowledge of Christ through scripture and putting your knowledge to work for what was so precious to Christ that he literally died for it and that is his church.

See, the church -- people think the church, they think, yeah, it's 25 Sullivan Avenue, that's where the -- no, it's 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 the four reasons that the original church met. They're defined in *Acts 2:42*. It says: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* It's those four things, it's doctrine, fellowship, communion and prayer. That's what the church is all about. Those are the means by which we grow our love for Christ, because you can't love a Christ you don't know.

And the way Christ wants you to grow in the knowledge and love for him is through the apostle's teaching which is biblically based preaching, and through fellowship which is us sharpening each other as iron sharpens iron and through communion which is each of us corporately confessing and acknowledging our need to make Christ an intimate part of who we are and finally through prayer.

You know, this church got its start I believe because there was a group of godly women who made it their business to pray through those first few years. And it survives now, I guarantee you, not by the competence of its leadership -- I can attest to that -- but by the faithful ones who still hold this place up in prayer. And we still have a great deal of growing and learning to do. And so we're 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.

And finally it goes without saying the third part of the scripture, it 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.* This is a wicked world and its wickedness is no longer subtle, you don't need drag queens to tell you that. 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 up one another to love and good works.

Our Wednesday night prayer meeting, it's available to everybody in the privacy of your own home through Zoom or at church if you want to come in person. We have a monthly meeting that meets to pray

for prodigals. We call it POPS, praying for our prodigals, people who have walked away from the faith. I'm astounded that that's not jammed with people who are asking to pray for bringing back their prodigals. It's coming up this Wednesday. And you can text, you can email, you can call, you can encourage one another, you can send us your prayer requests. You see, now more than ever we've got to push back against the darkness.

Meanwhile we have a brand new year right in front of us. These times are indeed evil but God is sovereign even over evil times. So number one, *look carefully how you walk, not as unwise but wise;* number two, *make the best use of your time;* and number three, understand just how and why these days are evil. Let's pray.

*Father, I thank you that there's so many that we come in contact with that are just bewildered at where this world is going that don't know you. They just know something's not right. They know that something is desperately wrong. And Lord, you've given us the insight and the grace and the ability to know that you are sovereignly in charge and nothing is happening outside of your will. But Lord, there's this enormous amount of wisdom that's just sitting closed in your book. I pray this new year we would begin to access that, we would begin to read and study and learn and grow in our understanding and knowledge of who you are so that we can*

*communicate that to those who are desperately seeking it. And I  
pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*