

Time Well Spent

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[0 : 01] Well, again, I want to say welcome to you. My name's Kevin, one of the pastors here, and I'm so glad that we're able to worship together, both for those of you who are tuning in at home and for those of you who are here in person.

It is a joy and a real privilege to be able to preach this morning to you. And I wanna begin this morning with a story from my teenage years. Back in high school, I became a Christian through a ministry called Young Life.

It's a great organization. And their mission is to share the gospel with kids who are unchurched, kids like myself, who would never have stepped foot inside a church except for maybe at Christmas or a funeral.

I didn't grow up going to youth group, but Young Life groups were what I imagined to be a bit like a youth group, except they're customized for rowdy, secular kids. We would play some sort of game during our gatherings, and we would sing a bunch of songs, kind of like church.

And then a cool college student would stand up and give a talk about Jesus. When we would sing songs, we would normally sing contemporary, upbeat pop songs.

[1 : 12] But every now and again, every four to six weeks or so, we would sing this really sad song. And it's a song that has always haunted me, and I wanna read some of the lyrics for us.

It's Cats in the Cradle by Henry Chapin, or Chapin. And the song tells the story of a dad who means really well, but he's just too busy to actually spend time with his son.

And then his whole life passes him by, and he misses out on his son's life. We're gonna look at how the song begins and how the song ends. So this is the first verse. My child arrived just the other day.

He came to the world in the usual way. But there were planes to catch and bills to pay. He learned to walk while I was away. And he was talking before I knew it, and as he grew, he said, I'm gonna be like you, Dad.

You know I'm gonna be like you. And then the chorus. The cats in the cradle and the silver spoon, little boy blue and the man in the moon. When are you coming home, Dad? I don't know when.

[2 : 12] But we'll get together then. You know we'll have a good time then. The next two verses, same pattern. The second verse is his son is 10 years old, wants to play ball with his dad.

His dad's too busy. The third verse, things switch a little bit. The dad wants to spend some time with his son, but his kid's in college and just wants to drive his dad's car. Too busy, don't have time.

This is the final verse of the song. I've long since retired. This is the dad speaking. My son's moved away. I called him up just the other day. I said, I'd like to see you if you don't mind.

He said, I'd love to, Dad, if I can find the time. You see, my new job's a hassle and the kids have the flu. Sure nice talking to you, Dad. It's been sure nice talking to you.

And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me, he'd grown up just like me. My boy was just like me. And the final chorus, and the cats in the cradle and the silver spoon, little boy blue and the man in the moon.

[3 : 11] When are you coming home, son? I don't know when. But we'll get together then, Dad. We're gonna have a good time then. I have to say this song hits me quite a bit differently 20 years now that I have kids from when I was a 16-year-old boy.

You know, this song is a great discipleship case study in many ways on the power of imitation. The son becomes just like his father. But what I wanna highlight this morning is what this song teaches us about time.

It's a morality tale about time. And it's a warning. Time is precious. Time is our most valuable resource. Our life is how we spend our time.

Don't waste it. As we continue our series this morning on discipleship and emotionally healthy spirituality, we're going to be focusing on time. And we're gonna look at three things. We're gonna look at a framework for how to think about time. We're gonna look at the greatest threat to our time today. And then I wanna introduce or reintroduce us to a few practices to make the best use of our time.

[4 : 19] So let's pray together. Heavenly Father, Father, we come before you even as we stood up to hear your holy word.

Lord, I pray that you would help us to understand your word, to think about what that means to stand under your word, that we would submit to it, that it would transform us, that it would change us.

Lord, your word says in Psalm 91, teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. And that's our prayer this morning. I pray these things in Christ's holy name.

Amen. So first, with our passage, we're gonna look at the Apostle Paul's framework for how to think about time. In the first half of the letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul unpacks the glory of the gospel.

And it can be summarized in Ephesians 2, verses 12 and 13. Paul writes this. Remember that you were at that time before you were a Christian. You were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

[5 : 28] But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. This is the heart of the gospel that Jesus died to save sinners.

That's what Paul unpacks in Ephesians chapter 1 through chapter 3. And in the second half, chapters 4 through 6, Paul unpacks how the gospel is to be worked into every corner of our lives, like kneading yeast into dough.

Throughout the Bible, the language of walking is a common metaphor for describing our relationship, our life with God. And it's a really great metaphor if you stop to think about it. It shows us that faith is active and dynamic. It's not static. It tells us that our faith has a certain pace to it. It's not a sprint. It's an endurance race.

And it tells us that faith is not just something in the past, but it's oriented towards a goal in the future. And Paul uses this walking metaphor quite a lot in the second half of Ephesians.

[6 : 31] He says we are to walk in unity. We're to walk in holiness. We are to walk in light and in love. And in our passage, we're to walk in wisdom. Walking in wisdom simply means mastering the art of living well.

Mastering the art of living well. The wise person understands her context and can discern how she should respond, how she should act in any given situation. And so in our passage this morning, verses 15 to 21, Paul is answering two questions.

When are we and how should we then live? When are we and how should we then live? So the first question, when are we? Well, Paul has a surprising answer.

It's actually kind of a scary one. He says we are living in evil days. So what in the world does Paul mean by that? Seems very dramatic. Well, Paul hints at what he means earlier in his letter to the Ephesians in chapter 2.

He says that we are living in a time where there are forces at work. He calls them the world and the flesh and the devil. These forces that desire nothing less than our distraction or our destruction.

[7 : 42] And when you think about it, in the end, these two aren't really that different. I think it can be easy to think that time is neutral. But that's not at all how the Bible describes it.

You see, the Apostle Paul conceives of time in two ages. There are two ages. First, there's the present evil age in which we currently live. That's the time between Jesus' first coming and his second coming.

And the second age is the age to come, what we call heaven, when Jesus returns and sets the world to rights. We live in the present evil age. And so even though we are living 2,000 or so years after the Apostle Paul, we inhabit the same time.

And so when Paul says we're living in evil days, what he's doing is he's providing our existential or spiritual time coordinates. We live in a time where there's powerful forces working against us, trying to thwart any progress we might make in our walk with God.

And so during these evil days, the Christian life is less of a walk in the park and more like a walk through a minefield. It's meant to be sobering. So, what does this mean for how we should live our lives?

[8 : 57] Because the days are evil, Paul writes, look carefully then how you walk. Not as unwise, but as wise, the exhortation is to make the best use of our time.

And so I want to point out two things here. First is, because the days are evil, Paul says we are to remain vigilant. We're supposed to be very careful. Look carefully at how we walk. We're not to fall asleep spiritually.

Paul wants us to wake up. And he calls us to live very intentionally with great care. He calls us to watch our steps, watch where we walk. And I want to be very clear here.

Paul is not saying we're supposed to live in fear. Neither is he saying we're supposed to disengage from the world. He's saying we're supposed to take great care in how we engage the world, take great care in how we spend our time.

We are to seize every single opportunity we have to love God and to love our neighbors, to take advantage of every chance we have to be signposts for the kingdom of God in a dark world.

[9 : 57] We're to not waste our time. The second thing I want to point out is just what I find most interesting about this passage. What I find most interesting is that Paul doesn't give us a list of rules for how to not waste our time.

He doesn't give us a bunch of rules. Instead, he gives us a kind of pattern and then a really great example. And so I want to look at that pattern that he gives us and then unpack the example a little bit. So here's the pattern.

Our passage is structured around three contrasting statements. Don't be this way, be this way instead. Instead, don't do this, do this instead. He says, do not be unwise, but be wise.

Do not be foolish, but discern the will of the Lord. And then finally, do not get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit. Three contrasts. What we're seeing is a profound moral logic here.

We shouldn't be surprised that this is in the Bible. You see, God created us. He knows how we tick. He knows how we're formed and what we need. He knows that nature and the human soul abhor a vacuum.

[11 : 00] Our Heavenly Father knows that when his kids are hungry, it won't do to just say don't have candy. He needs to provide a carrot for us instead. And the moral logic is really simple. It's as simple as this.

Say no to say yes. It's simply but elegantly pictured in this slide of a thumbs up and a thumbs down. This is what it means to walk in wisdom.

This is what it looks like. Saying no or yes to the right things at the right time. Saying no or yes to the right things at the right time.

Very simple, not very easy. That's the pattern. Now I want to look at the example that Paul gives us. And it may seem odd at first, but if you stop to think about it and reflect upon it, it's actually a brilliant example.

Paul says in 518, do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. So why does Paul mention wine here?

[12 : 02] Well, it's not the use of alcohol but the abuse of alcohol that's the problem. And so Paul mentions getting drunk, not getting drunk because on the surface, getting drunk is a really obvious example of wasting time.

Now, the word for debauchery I think would probably be better translated as dissipation. Don't get drunk with wine for that is dissipation. Dissipation means to squander or to waste the act of wasting by misuse.

If you want to waste your life, get wasted all the time. That's what Paul is saying. And if we dig a little bit deeper and we pay attention to the contrast with being filled with the Spirit, we'll see that getting drunk is not simply a good example of wasting time.

It shows us that getting drunk can lead to doing or saying things that you wouldn't do if you were in your right mind, that you wouldn't do normally.

So Paul contrasts wine and the Holy Spirit because these are two things external to us that can have a profound influence on our lives, two things outside of us that can shape us and drive us and dictate what we do.

[13:12] So when Paul says to be filled by the Spirit, he's conjuring the image of a boat, of a sailboat whose sails are filled with wind and driven forward.

What you're filled with really matters. What we allow to fill our bodies and our hearts and our minds has a profound influence. Be filled with wine and this leads only to ruin, but be filled with the Spirit and this leads to all of the qualities of healthy relationships in Christian community that we see in Ephesians 5 verses 19 through 21.

So if we want to make the best use of our time, Paul is saying, we need to be very careful about what we let influence our heart and our mind and our body because we are so impressionable. We need to be wise about what impacts us. Now I want you to think about something. If Paul were writing this letter not to the Ephesians in the first century but to our church for instance in Washington D.C.

in the 21st century, what example do you think he might give instead of exhorting us not to get drunk with wine? Take a minute to think about what he would say instead of that example.

[14:27] Now of course I think Paul's example of alcohol, of getting drunk would still apply to us and to our context but I'll tell you what I think he would say. Instead of saying don't get drunk with wine, I think Paul would say don't get hypnotized by your screens.

Don't get hypnotized by your screens. This leads us to the second move this morning. The greatest threat to making the best use of our time. I think that the greatest threat to our making the best use of the time is our screens.

Our smartphones, our tablets, our laptops, our TVs, however you like to stare at the screen. The black mirror that casts the hypnotic blue glow is the greatest threat to our time.

I'm convinced of that. Now, it's not lost on me that most of the people listening to this sermon are doing so through a screen and I want to be very clear, screens in and of themselves aren't evil.

It's not the use of screens, it's the abuse of screens just like with alcohol. Nevertheless, I think screens are the greatest threat to our time. Now, this morning I'll resist commenting on some of the alarming statistics between the impact of screens and our mental health and the destruction of our social fabric.

[15:43] I know that correlation is not the same as causation. The data isn't yet conclusive on that. We're still subjecting ourselves and our children to that experiment. I think we'll have to wait a few more years to really see what it's doing to us.

But what I can say with confidence is that screens are the greatest threat to making the best use of our time because of their power for addiction and their power for manipulation.

Our screens are causing us to be addicted and they're manipulating us. I think the greatest external influence, the primary place of our catechesis, of our forming our hearts and our minds, shaping our moral imaginations, is the media that we consume on our screens.

And we really need to walk in wisdom with this technology that is in our back pockets. Now, I probably don't need to convince you about how addicting our screens are.

But nevertheless, here are some statistics and these stats are about just our phone screens. It doesn't have anything to say about our tablets or our television use. On average, we pick up our phone and have a session on our phone 58 times a day.

[16:57] So if you're awake for 16 hours, that means we're on our phone for a session every 15 minutes, four times an hour. The average American spends three hours and 15 minutes on their smartphone.

And the top users, I suspect people like the folks in our church, the average time is up to four and a half hours a day. That means we spend close to a quarter of our day bent over, necks hunched, curved in on ourselves, staring at our screens.

And studies show that you don't even have to be looking at your phone for it to distract you, to have an impact on your life. Even if it's in the same room with you, it distracts us. It distracts us from our work or from our prayer or being in conversation with people that are actually with us in the same room.

You know, I am embarrassed to say, but I can't tell you how many times I've looked down at my phone to check something and I don't have notifications on my phone. I'm smart enough not to have notifications, but I look at my phone to check my email or a calendar appointment and then just seeing an app on my phone distracts me.

And I'm mindlessly sucked into the timeless news feed or a funny cat video vortex or some other stupid thing on the internet only to be spit out an hour later realizing that I've totally lost track of my time.

[18:18] I don't even know what, I can't remember what just happened for the past hour. I don't know if you can relate to that. Our screens are dicting and they're wasting our time. And they're not addictive by accident.

A documentary called *The Social Dilemma* talks about this. This is a great documentary. I encourage you to read it or to watch it. The documentary interviews leaders from big tech and people who've woken up to how harmful the tech industry can be, how harmful some of this technology and media and the apps and platforms and sites that they helped create can be. They pull back the curtain for why this technology and why our screens are so highly addictive. All these big companies, Google, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, they all have a business model that depends on gluing eyes to screens.

Their bottom line depends on this. And so an unbelievable amount of resources is devoted to hacking our attention and exploiting our vulnerabilities. The saying goes, if you're not paying for a product like Gmail, for instance, you are the product.

Our attention is the product. They're making money off of our attention and so they want to get the most of it that they can. That's why it's addicting. But the reality actually is far worse.

[19:40] The danger of screens is far worse than just addiction. The real source of money is not just our attention but the manipulation of our behavior, the manipulation of our activity in the world.

This is how Jaron Lanier describes it. He's a really fascinating guy. He's a Silicon Valley scientist, the author of a book called *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. He says this. This is how they monetize these companies. It's the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in our behavior and perception that is the product.

That's what they're making money off of. That's the only thing for them to make money from. This is terrifying. Changing what you do, how you think, and who you are.

That's the real danger of screens. They're changing what we do, what we think, and who we are. We're being manipulated by them. We're willingly being manipulated by them.

[20:39] We hold our screens but our screens really have a grip on us. Now here's a real world example of what this manipulation can look like. They talk about this in the documentary. A couple years ago Facebook did an experiment on its users and they're constantly running experiments on us, believe it or not.

They were testing to see if subliminal cues on Facebook pages could impact voter turnout. And they twisted some dials and they realized that they could actually change real world events.

The subliminal cues worked. Got more people to vote in midterm elections. And of course voting is good but this kind of power is terrifying. They could maybe get us to not vote or vote for a particular candidate or another candidate.

They can manipulate our behavior and our emotions and real world events without us ever knowing that they're influencing us. It's pretty scary stuff. Our phone screens, I like to think of them, is sort of like a pocket-sized black hole relentlessly sucking in all of our time into itself and when it spits us back out it's manipulated into what we think and what we feel and what we do.

And as disciples of Jesus Christ we need to pay attention to this and we need to think about how we're using this technology. Now to their good credit some people in the tech industry are trying to resist the corrosive effect of screens.

[22:08] They've wakened up to this and they're trying to sort of solve some of the problems that they've created. And this has given rise to a movement called the Time Well Spent Movement. I don't know about you but I'm a little bit suspicious of turning to big tech to solve some of the problems that they've created.

Especially when as Christians we have tremendous resources from the Christian tradition to do this. And so lastly I want to look at and introduce perhaps reintroduce us to some practices for us to make the best use of our time.

I like to think of these as ancient wisdom for some of our modern problems. The three practices are fasting, the daily office, and the Sabbath. And this is a lot of this is from chapter 6 of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* which we're tracking through in our core groups.

So we'll spend more time in our core groups talking about some of these details. What I'm going to talk about now is not really trying to be comprehensive. It's more of a quick overview of how we can incorporate these practices into our lives with a mind towards resisting the power of screens in our lives.

So first the practice of fasting. The same moral logic applies to fasting as we've been talking about. It's the practice of saying no so that we can say yes to other things.

[23 : 28] This week as a community we're inviting you to fast from social media to give some of this a try. And realistically fasting for a week from social media is not going to rewire our brain or break bad habits.

We spend so much time on our screens we can't break the bad habit in just a week. I'd like to think of it more as like a diagnostic tool this week with fasting from social media. It will probably just expose our dependence to our screens.

But that's a good thing. It's a good first step. Admitting that you have a problem is the first step towards recovery. The first step towards walking and wisdom. So fast. Fast from social media. Stop using social media. Limit your intake of other media as well. Try to stay off screens as much as possible outside of work or school. And as you go through this experience ask yourself pay attention journal what is it like to unplug?

What is it like to get off of your screen? How is the Lord inviting you? Ask yourself this how is the Lord inviting you to repent and believe this week? Remember repentance is not just is not really feeling bad about bad habits or what you've done or about yourself.

[24 : 40] Repenting is turning around. It's turning from deadly habits towards more life-giving ones from deadly activities to more life-giving activities. So that's the first practice fasting.

The next two the daily office and the Sabbath are more directly related to time. And I like to think of these two practices as contemplative life hacks contemplative time hacks.

They're daily and weekly practices that help us to think and act more carefully with our time. They help us to structure our time so that we might be able to do so. And they provide the space that's required so that we might be filled by the Holy Spirit to hear the voice of the Lord that God loves us and what he wants us to do that we might discern the will of the Lord.

So the second practice is the daily office. This is the daily rhythm. The daily office is simply set times of prayer set times of silence scripture reading that frame our day.

Set times set apart so that we can pay attention to God. It's usually two or three times throughout our day. It can be morning and evening or morning, noon, and evening.

[25 : 54] And it's a great practice for structuring our day to orient us towards our day. For many of us, I suspect, we have a really bad habit of the first thing that we look at in the morning and the last thing that we look at at night is a screen.

Checking our email, looking at the news, whatever it may be. And that's not a good habit. That's a very bad habit. Perhaps the best and most strategic thing you can do every single day to resist the power and the manipulation of screens is the daily office.

So in the morning, commit to not looking at your screen before you look at the scriptures. And in the evening, plug your phone in an hour before you go to bed, put it to sleep, put it to rest, put it in another room, and don't look at it again.

Instead of doom scrolling right before you go to sleep, practice the daily examine, the practice that Pastor Tommy led us through, taught us about last Sunday. When we practice the daily office, we resist allowing the notifications on our screen or our email or our appointments in our calendar to structure our day.

We allow God's word and God's voice to structure our day. And the final practice, we have fasting, the daily office, and then the Sabbath. And this is our weekly rhythm.

[27 : 11] My favorite description of the Sabbath is from a theologian named Marva Dawn. She describes the Sabbath as a royal waste of time. I love that. It's a day, 24-hour period, set apart where we take a break from the grind of production and consumption.

It's a day set apart devoted to wasting time with the king of the universe. And there's a movement to the Sabbath. The movement is stopping and contemplation and feasting.

I want to talk a little bit about each one of these. So, Sabbath, the word Shabbat means to cease or to stop. So, the first movement for the Sabbath is stopping.

As that relates to our screens, that just means turning off your phone. Spend a day where you're not looking at your screen. Put it away for the whole day. And it's really helpful for Sabbath to mark the time, both the beginning and the end, to set it apart.

So, what I like to do is to say a prayer to start the Sabbath. So, I'm entering into this day that's set apart and as it's ending, I like to say a prayer to wrap things up. Committing things to the Lord and then thanking the Lord for how he's met me in this period of time.

[28 : 26] So, stop using the screen. Give it a rest. Sabbath is a day to say no. It's the same movement. We're saying no in order to say yes. The Sabbath is a day to say no but it's also a day of saying yes.

The Sabbath is not a vacuum. It's not a day of just being sad and alone in a dark room. And this is where contemplation comes in. This is where we fill ourselves up. We get off our screens and we don't just look at nothing.

We get off our screens in order to get into God's world, into creation and to get more deeply into God's word. We contemplate. We look. We listen. We pay attention to God and we allow the tangled mess of our lives to be untangled.

We allow God to reorient our priorities and our values. And the final movement of Sabbath keeping is feasting. We savor.

We enjoy. We celebrate. We embrace the things that are most life-giving and restore our humanity. So instead of binging a show on Netflix, maybe read a book for pleasure.

[29 : 31] Maybe read some poetry. Instead of liking posts on social media from perfect strangers, invest, spend some time in your most important relationships. That might require getting creative in these times.

go for a walk outside with a friend or write a letter or do something to serve or bless somebody in the community. Now there's much more to say about all these practices.

We're just scratching the surface and we just looked at them through the angle of resisting the power of screens. Our hope this week is that you'll spend some more time working these things out more fully in the context of your core groups or your spiritual friendships.

This morning, I want to close with a poem. A poem, poetry, is one of my favorite things to do on the Sabbath. It's one of my spiritual practices, actually. Because I found poetry to be one of the greatest antidotes to the flurry of Twitter hot takes and the relentless pace of the 24-7 news cycle.

Reading good poetry, the practice of reading good poetry, is a slow and a quiet and a radical challenge to the harmful habits reinforced by our screens.

[30 : 41] The poem I'm going to read is one of my favorite poems and it ties together so many of the themes that we've been exploring together this morning. It's a poem that invites us to think about how we spend our time and therefore how we spend our lives.

The poem is *The Summer Day* by Mary Oliver. I'll end with this. Who made the world? Who made the swan and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper? This grasshopper, I mean. The one who has flung herself out of the grass. The one who is eating sugar out of my hand. Who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down.

Who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes. Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open and floats away. I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention.

[31 : 45] How to fall down into the grass. How to kneel down in the grass. How to be idle and blessed. How to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for speaking to us. Lord, we pray that you would help us to not only be hearers of your word, but to be doers.

Lord, would you help us to reorient our lives, restructure our lives, help us to make the best use of the time. Lord, again we pray, teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

We pray all these things, Lord, for our good, for the good of your world and for your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.