

Intentional Priorities 2023
Ephesians 5:10-17 Revelation 3:15-22

Ephesians 5:10-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Revelation 3:15-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Back in the old days, before we navigated by GPS on our cellphones,
you needed to have a good map handy, you had to know where you were
to make sure the road you're on will take you where you want to go,
in order to arrive at the place where you wanted to be.

For growing Christians, our Bible & Church will become **our good map.**
Prayer, study, meditation & honest reflection with other believers
can help us determine **where we are** along our journey of faith,
as we consider the priorities we're choosing along the way.

So are you on the right path toward the person God created you to be,
and are you living the sort of life choices & priorities
that you believe God intends & has equipped you to live?

Does the life you're leading match with what you claim to believe,
and over this past year has your **life of faith** grown & progressed?
That is the point and message of the Ephesians passage, vs. 10-11, 13

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness ...
for everything exposed by the Light becomes visible.

Here, 'try to find out' means to test, evaluate and consider,
to give it some careful thought and timely reflection, vs. 15~17

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time ... So do
not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

**The way we live, the choices and priorities we hold in life
will either improve or diminish our relationship with God,**

and we are either walking toward God, or we are walking away.

We are called to better and more than **careless mediocrity**, vs. 19

"Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

An authentic encounter with Jesus changes things and changes people.

There is an initial encounter that begins our faith journey,
and then throughout our life, experience by experience,
God continues to guide us deeper, to follow & respond.

And every day in many different ways we are **called afresh** to follow,
with new opportunity to grow & serve more faithfully & effectively,
for our lives to reflect in amazing and wonderful ways
God's grace, love, truth, compassion, joy and power.

The truth is, to be called and to become a Christian is pretty easy,
but to live out that call faithfully that's a bit more difficult,
and to follow that call to discipleship seriously,
is a lifetime of growing deeper and closer to God.

It's an on-going process that continues into and beyond the present.

We are **living projects** in the process of God's purpose & grace,
and letting God's presence permeate and penetrate our crust.

By faith we learn to see and respond to our world in new & better ways,
to be like salt and light making a difference in the lives around us.

And if our faith is not growing deeper **and not making a difference**,
then we share in a serious problem with the church at Laodicea,
and the harsh condemnation we read in Revelation, vs. 15~19

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So,
because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are
wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ... I reprove and discipline those whom I love.

This was addressed to a church that had everything going for it.

Laodicea was a thriving metropolis & hub for trade & commerce,
economic conditions were good and the people were well-off.

Unlike the other ancient churches that are addressed in Revelation,
these Christians were not suffering under persecution,
and the church wasn't struggling with scarcity or conflict.

It was really a very nice, prosperous and easy **comfortable church**,
and yet it received extremely harsh condemnation from Jesus, vs. 16

I am about to spit you out of my mouth. (Yikes!)

Their religion was not cold, nor hot, Jesus calls it lukewarm spit.

It's not that they were rejecting the Christian faith,
or doing some great and terrible evil or outrageous sin...

... it's just that their faith lacked passion, commitment and life,

and clearly Jesus was not pleased or satisfied with them.

They hadn't specifically turned against Jesus, just lackadaisical,
with an uncommitted faith that was about doing **the least possible...**
... faith just enough to soothe & relive their feelings of guilt,
but not enough to actually affect any real change or growth.

In this passage, Jesus is speaking to the Church, maybe to our church,
and promising to Christians who already believe, a deeper faith,
a more authentic relationship with them **if they will allow it.**

I am pounding on your door, let me in and let's get at it, vs. 20.

Listen! **I am standing at the door, knocking;** if you hear my voice and open the door, I will
come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

This is not a conversion text or call to become a Christian,
but written to the Church, to those already believers.
The message is, I love and care for you far too much & dearly
to allow your self-deception and complacency to continue.

We too can fall into that same a trap of comfort and familiarity,
so confident and sure of our facts and religious understandings,
that our faith slips into autopilot or cruise-control...
... so set and predictable, so confident and comfortable,
that our heart becomes **impenetrable and un-reach-able.**

The promise, **I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me**
is describing a lifetime and faith-driven committed lifestyle
of a continuously growing & deepening relationship with God.
It is a life that seeks to fulfill God's purpose in our lives,
not driven by guilt, **but by our hunger to love & to serve God vs. 18~19**

Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; ... **I reprove
and discipline those whom I love.** Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

The point is that our struggles & failures can act as a refining fire
that can burn off the dross of **spiritual pride & lazy complacency.**

So, as we think about this journey we're on that we call life,
are you satisfied with the direction that you are traveling,
and do you think you are **where and who** God intends you to be?

Are your life & your relationships healthy and pleasing to the Lord?
How well are you handling your life's challenges and adversity,
or the decisions & the hard times that we all must pass through?

It is actually less about our circumstances or situation in life,
than it is our choice of perspective, our trust & response to grace.

In the quiet,
the introspective and truthful places of our hearts and minds,
how are we responding to God's grace and presence in our lives?
Is it a priority to let God's love & purpose blossom & flourish in me?

It's not a matter of guilt or simply trying ever harder to be good,
but a call to listen for the Spirit to reveal the will of God,
and then **rightly respond to the gracious love we have received**,
knowing **there'll be no outward change without prior inward change**.

The question is not if there will be challenges or struggles ahead,
but rather how will we choose to respond to whatever comes our way.

This year, I want to be more intentional about whatever God is up to,
and prioritize how can I manage to get in on the works of our Lord,
and **recalibrate my life** toward the will, desire & purpose of God?

We have virtually no control over what will happen to us this year,
but what we do with it, how we respond is certainly by our choice.
So is your priority and focus is on what you actually can do to live
more faithfully within the limits of this life you've been given?

I am reminded of when during seminary,
I was chosen for a travel and study seminar in the Middle East.
On our way to the Atlanta airport a good friend and I discussed
the fact that we were both very fortunate to be going at all,
and it was unlikely that either of us would ever get to go back.

So we agreed that for the whole journey, every day along the way,
we would consistently push ourselves and remind each other
to make the most of that amazing blessing and opportunity.

That meant, when some of the others wanted to rest, nap or play cards,
we would not, but we'd use the time to explore something further.
Whenever there was an option or possibility to do more,
if there was something more to explore, **we always did**.

I am still deeply grateful that I came home from that amazing trip
with zero regrets that we hadn't done all that we possibly could,
but had squeezed the opportunity for every drop of wonder we could.

That is how I want to live my life & relationship with the Lord, vs. 15

... careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time.

Every choice and every decision that we make this next year
will either deepen or hinder our relationship with God,
for we're either walking toward God or we are walking away.

And that, should be the measure by which we decide our priorities,
as in Ephesians, vs. 10 Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.
(Intentional priorities, not sit back and just let it happen.)

As we move into a new year, it's typical to make NY's resolutions
about how we're going to change so that our lives are different.

Relying on our own willpower, earnest effort and determination,
we intend to escape and change from our bad habits and failings ...

... and yet all too often despite our good intentions & effort
we will eventually slip back into our old patterns again.

As Christians there is another way that is more effective & better.

Instead of my own willpower, earnest effort & determination,
I'm going to focus on drawing nearer and closer to God,
and let the Spirit & Jesus do the heavy lifting this year.

This coming year I am making that my theme, priority & perspective,
in hopeful expectation ... which also raises a challenging question,
about what and how specifically do I need to change and improve,
so I can live more toward the life that God intends for me,
so that God's Holy Spirit can do growth-work in me,
rather than me just passing through another year?

First, I do believe and I trust that as a matter of faith

**I am living within the life-situation that God intends for me
and that God has blessed and equipped for me to face it well,
for me to make a difference and for my faith to grow deeper.**

So the question is, how do I respond in faith, trust & obedience,
so to know, enjoy & love Jesus more deeply and follow more nearly?

Years ago as a businessman, I decided to take God more seriously,
and so the next year I followed through that resolution
by trying to love and learn, to serve and obey God better.

To that end, during that entire year,
I read at least one chapter of both New & Old Testament everyday
and if I missed a day, I doubled up on my readings to catch up.
Also for that year, I wrote in a prayer-journal every day,
and every-other-book I read was toward **strengthening my faith.**

Whenever there was a decision that I needed to make,
I tried to begin by first thinking about and reflecting on
which choice or option would **most likely improve my faith,**
toward a more passionate faith that grows & makes a diff.

That year turned out to be a blessing, totally life-changing,
one of the most significant years along my spiritual journey
in which God blessed me far beyond even my wildest imaginings.

With that in mind, and wanting to grow as a disciple this year,
I suggest these 6 practical actions toward a better new year:

- 1 - be more faithful in Bible study and other inspiring readings
- 2 - a focused and regular time for prayer and meditation with God
- 3 - committed to worship in community for regular spirit-feeding
- 4 - Christian service, generous with time, resources and passion
to somehow to make a meaningful difference for God's Kingdom
- 5 - work toward healthier relationships with God and other people,
as Paul wrote, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

- ⁶ - regularly and thoughtfully reevaluate my life's priorities,
and are they in accord with God's call and purpose for me?

And according to God's Word and what Jesus promised:

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and **all these things** will be given to you as well. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and **straining forward** to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal **for the prize** of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Matthew 6:33 + Philippians 3:13-14)