

REDEEM THE TIME

a sermon preached in the
Duke University Chapel

by

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Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 5:6-17

From time to time as I read the marvellous writings of St. Paul as they are found in our New Testament, I discover an idea which literally leaps from the page, captures my imagination, and will not be satisfied until I have given it appropriate attention, and explored its meaning. Such a passage is the topic of the sermon of the morning.

As one reads along in the Fifth Chapter of Ephesians, Paul is giving some very good advice. It is rather practical and understandable. Then one reads the sixteenth verse, in a sense the climax of this chapter where Paul states, "Redeem the time because these are evil days."

Here Paul brings one of his profound theological categories, redemption, to bear upon the most common, mundane facet of our existence - time. Here we get an insight into Paul's theology, a pervasive, encompassing theology that sees all of life, every minute aspect of it, as coming under the influence of Jesus Christ and his redeeming work. He advises the Corinthian Church to "Bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor.10:5). Here he is reminding us that time, the measure of life itself must be redeemed.

Contained in this verse is Paul's awareness that God has redeemed past time. The Cross of Christ becomes the turning point - the watershed of time and of history. The past is thus redeemed, it is given a new dimension - a new perspective - and that dimension is forgiveness.

Paul's faith is such that all future time is redeemed. For it is a resurrected Lord who stands at the end of time and whose presence has an eternal dimension characterized by faith and hope, and victory. He is the Lord of all time, even eternity.

Indeed Paul would agree with the writer of Revelation who has the resurrected Lord stating, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 22:13). This is at least in part, what Paul has in mind when he talks of Redeeming the time. He reminds us that all of time and all of life are in God's hands.

But in this passage Paul is talking not of history nor of the future, nor of eternity. In Paul Tillich's words he is speaking of the eternal now. He is speaking of the all important present, and he is telling his readers, he is telling us, that we must have a part in this redemptive process. Redeem the time! Redeem these times in which we live.

Listen again to Paul as we might paraphrase these verses:

"Live then as children of the light. The light produces in men...everything that is wholesome and true. Let your lives be living proof of the things which please God. Steer clear of the activities of darkness; let your life show by contrast how dreary and futile these (evil) things are...

Live life then with a due sense of responsibility, not as men who do not know the purpose of life, but as those who do.

Redeem the time, because the days are evil... Don't be vague, but firmly grasp what you know to be the will of God."

This text is a sober and realistic one. It recognizes that present time is always in need of redeeming grace. It recognizes that any time is not especially an easy time to live as men of faith, we might be so bold as to say that this last third of the 20th Century that is given to our generation is one of the most difficult. For ours is a time between the times. It is a time of moral confusion and uncertainty. It is a time when national goals and ways to achieve them are unclear. A time when many of our leaders seem to be unsure.

A glance at recent books reveals titles that speak of a "tangled world," "a broken world", an unsure world. The headlines of the year just past are headlines about assassination, confrontation, warfare abroad - and at home - and moral ambiguity in high places. Paul looked at a similar world in the first Century and uttered advice that we should heed. Listen:

"Live life with a due sense of responsibility, not as men who do not know the purpose of life, but as those who do. Redeem the time, because the days are evil."

I. I do not wish to dwell upon the negative today, but to be realistic we must recognize that the days are evil. The stabilizing institutions of our society are under attack from many sources. Government, church, home, and school have been the object of many who would misdirect our national and individual lives. Moral integrity and self-discipline are out of style. A national publication calls ours "The Permissive Society." Permissiveness characterizes much of our collective and personal lives. Hazy thinking blurs the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong. There seems to be no limit upon those who are the peddlers of the obscene, the vulgar, and the immoral. One is reminded of the words of Isaiah:

"Woe to them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light and light for darkness, that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter." (Isaiah 5:20)

"As the fire devours the stubble, and the flame consumes the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have

cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the Holy One of Israel." (Isaiah 5:24)

There are many who speak of ours as a "world come of age," but what is so often overlooked is our world's misuse of its resources. We have indeed come of age scientifically and technologically, but our world is still an infant in matters of the spirit, moral virtue, and responsibility.

General Omar Bradley, hero of World War II, put it rightly:

"Humanity is in danger of being trapped in this world by its moral adolescence. Our knowledge of science has clearly outstripped our capacity to control it. We have too many men of science and too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Man is stumbling blindly through a spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious secrets of life and death. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom; power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than about peace; more about killing than about living. This is the 20th Century's claim to distinction and progress."

The problems described here will never be reckoned with by a permissive society. The need for discipline, moral integrity, and an openness to the divine dimensions of life is greater now than ever before. For not only are we threatened by atomic annihilation in international confrontation; we are threatened with disintegration in our moral and spiritual existence. In the words of Christopher Fry:

"Affairs are now soul size; the enterprise is exploration into God. Where are you going? It takes so many thousand years to wake -- But will you wake, for pity's sake."
(Quoted from "A Sleep of Prisoners" p.48)

This is precisely what Paul is saying in our Scripture: Affairs are now soul size, affairs are such that only the redemptive power of God can alter the course of our history. And Paul is calling for recruits in that redemptive process.

"Redeem the time, the days are evil."

"Where are you going...will you wake for pity's sake. For your own sake? For the sake of our world?"

II. But enough of this kind of thinking. There have always been more than enough problems in our world. And there has always been a call for men who could meet the challenges and be a part of the constructive role in history. Paul is not a pessimist. He tells us what to do with our times, with our history, with our life: Live as children of light in a dark world; let your life be living proof of the things which please God. Redeem the time!

How do we follow Paul's advice? How do we "Redeem the time"? Let me suggest the following as helpful advice for those who would take Paul seriously.

A. Choose light versus darkness. These are symbolic words, but words of much meaning and choose the beautiful, the true, the good, as the central ingredients of your life. Do not squander your God-given time and resources on those things which will tear down and destroy life.

B. Choose self-discipline versus permissiveness or self-indulgence. We are becoming a soft people, a people who expect ready answers and instant resources. But it is only to the man and woman who develop inner resources and inner guides and limits who can cope with the problems of our world. We decry the sad state of our world; but our world, our society will be renewed, made better only as you and I are better persons. We cannot create a moral, good society out of immoral, self-indulgent people. Woodrow Wilson reminded us that nations are renewed from the bottom up -- not vice versa. The church, the nation, our society will be renewed by the worthiness that springs from the ranks of all of us. Choose self-discipline. Pay the price to be a part of the answer to our world's needs. Don't be a part of the problem.

C. Choose wisely the direction and goal for your life. The lack of individual and national goals is at the root of many of our problems. Choose carefully; not just the easy path, but the path that is worthy of your calling as a child of God.

The late Dag Hammarskjold, of the United Nations, recorded his own experience with these words:

"But at some moment I did answer yes to Someone or Something. And from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender had a goal."

Answer yes to the great calling of life, of God! This is what Paul means -- "Redeem the time." Use your life in a redemptive way!

D. Finally, you are challenged to give yourself to that which you know to be the will of God for your own life. Our problem is not so much that we do not know the will of God as our unreadiness to give ourselves to that will. It is more a matter of our unwillingness to pay the price. Someone commented that all of the tragedies in Shakespeare's plays could have been avoided if, in the very first act, the characters had raised the question: "What is the will of God?" -- and responded thereto. Much of the human tragedy in our day, both personally and socially, might be avoided in the same manner. Struggle hard to know the will of God for your life. Work even harder to follow that will.

These, then, are ways in which we can "Redeem the Time."

Choose light versus darkness

Choose self-discipline versus self-indulgence

Choose wisely the goal of your life

Choose finally, and foremost, the will of God for your life.

III. I think of those who paid the price of self-discipline and self-giving: The founding fathers of the Christian faith; the founding fathers of this nation of ours. I think of more recent heroes who, by their gallant actions, are a part of our heritage, that even make it possible for us to consider the future. One of these was Lt. Edward H. O'Hare, for whom O'Hare Field in Chicago - the largest and busiest airport in the world - is named. A portrait of O'Hare hangs at the entrance of the International Terminal of that great airport. A bronze plaque tells why Lt. O'Hare was given the Congressional Medal of Honor and why the greatest airport in the world was named for him. These are the words on the plaque:

"For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in aerial combat, at the grave risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as section leader and pilot of Fighting Squadron #3. On February 20, 1942, having lost the assistance of his teammates, he interposed his plane between his ship and the advancing enemy formation of nine heavy bombers. Without hesitation, alone and unaided, he repeatedly attacked this enemy formation at close range in the face of their intense combined machine gun and cannon fire, and, despite this concentrated opposition, he, by his gallant and courageous action, his extremely skillful marksmanship, making the most of every shot of his limited amount of ammunition, shot down five enemy bombers and severely damaged a sixth before they reached the bomb release point.

"As a result of this daring action, one of the most daring...in the history of combat aviation, he undoubtedly saved his carrier from serious damage."

This is the same kind of daring action that we are called to perform if we are to save our nation and our world from serious damage -- or even destruction.

"God, give us men, a time like this demands strong minds,
great hearts, true faith, ready hands.
Men whom the lust of office does not kill,
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy.
Men who possess opinions and a will,
Men who have honor -- men who will not lie...
Tall men, sun crowned who live above the fog
in public duty and in private thinking."

God, give us men who can redeem the times in which we live.

God give you the will to be such men and women.

Prayer: O Thou who dost stand at the beginning and at the end of history - and of existence. Fill this now - this present moment with dimension of eternity. May our lives now be committed to Him who has redeemed the past and who holds the future even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.