

Whenever I talk to new parents, one of the things that becomes clear very early on is that they really are guessing their way through everything – when should we feed the child, have we put this strap on correctly, is the car seat safe, and so the list goes on. When we had Josh, I can remember being in the hospital – Alison was quite sick after his birth so I was given Josh by the nurses and pointed to the little room where you gave your baby a bath, and changed them. I can remember standing thinking to myself, what do I do next? Where do I put the child while I fill the little bath? And even today with now a strapping 17 year old and 14 year old, I keep asking the same questions – what do I do now. And here's the truth – the truth is that there is no secret manual that answers all the questions. You've just got to get on with it. That's why I think it's wrong for anyone to give advice on how another couple bring up their children, because there's no how to guide.

So that's children, but is there a how-to-guide for life? The Christian life for everyone of us can seem like a mind field – but we have such a great start through God's Word to guide us, God's Holy Spirit to walk with us, and God's people to support us along the way. Paul's letters offer incredible instruction for the Christian life, but no better place can be found than in Ephesians to understand what it truly means to be a Christian, both in faith and in practice. You should have a read at it, it's only 6 chapters. It will take you 15 minutes to read through – the first 3 chapters are very much centred about the amazing things that God has done for us and in us – that he adopted us, he brought us into a new family, he's given us a purpose. But then when you get to chapter 4 the focus changes onto us and what we are meant to do about our faith. It's a very practical how-to guide. And so in chapter 4 Paul begins by urging his readers to live a life worthy of the calling that we have received. And that kind of sets out a lot for today – that's our hope for Alfie, that as he grows up, that he lives his life worthy of the purpose and calling that God has planned for him. Now for Alfie that's not going to happen until he grows and understands God's love for him, but for the rest of us as adults we have an opportunity to assess whether we are living our lives worthy of the calling placed on us by God. I'm so very conscious that the children that we have around us need us to be the model and example of how to live life, because it passes onto them, whether we model good things or bad things. I'll give you 2 examples. When Nathan was quite young and speaking, he was in the back of my car when another car in front of me nearly had an accident. In my rage a few choice words came rolling out of my mouth, and within seconds of saying it, a 4 year old in the back was heard shouting the same thing.

A more positive example, was just last week when I left Josh off at his job in a hotel where he is a waiter. One of the well known adult members of staff came over to me and commended me for the mature well-mannered young man that Josh is. I hope that has come from how I would be around others and it's been passed on to him. You see people notice how we behave.

And Paul here in Ephesians 5 is talking about how we live – what we say and what we do. And how we live every day is observable by so many. The world is watching us, especially if we claim certain values. I can remember being out one night when I used to work in England and someone pointed out to me about the way I was behaving that night, knowing that back at home I was the one that professed that I followed the Lord Jesus, and I know I felt rather embarrassed by how I had behaved. So we are being observed, whether we like it or not. You know it's not at all easy to live the Christian life, because it is so countercultural to the way society operates today.

That's the world that Alfie is growing up in. So isn't it incredible that Paul is writing his how-to guide to the Church in Ephesus about how they should behave, and 2000 years later it's still as relevant today. There are loads of challenges and distractions today that we have to live with, and so we need dearly need God's Word to show us how to live our lives, and how to please Him.

If you want to look along at our reading today in your notes, we're going to look at a few things about how to live a life more reflective of what it means to be a follower. For you as a family, bringing up Alfie, but for all of us supporting young people in our lives, let's reflect here today on how we should live to please God. As we look at the reading, I wonder did you catch the contrast that Paul gives between one way of living and the other – it's seen in verses 15, 17 and 18. And he uses the word 'but'. Listen to verse 15 again – 'Be careful how you live, not as unwise BUT as wise'. In other words we have the choice – we can choose to live an unwise life or a wise life. Or what about verse 18 'Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. INSTEAD be filled with the Spirit'. In other words you can fill yourself full of wine or you can fill yourself with the Holy Spirit. We all have a choice in the decisions that we make. And I know some of us, including myself have made choices in the past that have been wrong, but the incredible thing with God is that he loves us so much that he won't give up on us, shaping us to begin making choices that are pleasing to him, and so much better for us.

The reason why Paul raises this is because we all live in a contrasting world, and we are being asked to live differently to what is around us. And the reality is that the pull and temptations around us are so inviting. But remember what Paul stated to the Romans in chapter 12 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind'. We must be distinct from those that choose not to follow God, not to lord over others as if we are something better, but to provide hope and love to those around us who are heading down a path that offers nothing eternal. The choices we make can be an incredible hope filled witness to many who see us.

And so if we are distinct then the first thing we need in our lives is to live it out with real purpose. We've got to pay lots of attention to how we are living our lives, that it is with purpose. That's where Paul starts in our reading when he says in verse 15 'Be very careful then'. We've got to pay attention to it. I'm very conscious that every now and again I need to stop and consider whether my attitude to certain things is right. Otherwise I just keep going on oblivious to what I'm doing, what I'm saying, and not caring about the impact that it might be having on family or others. I've got to have the discipline to change so that my life remains purposeful in God's eyes. Here's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9 about this in verse 26 (and this is from the English Standard Version) ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified'. He's saying that the life that we live must have a sense of discipline and self control in our lives. And in our Ephesians reading we see why this is so important – verse 16 'to make the most of every opportunity because the days are evil'. In other words we can't waste away our time. And yet I wonder if I was to count up the time I spend each day looking at my phone it would be scary – we can waste so much time.

So how then as Christians should we make the best use of our time, rather than waste it? Well it comes down to setting priorities – and I realise that's obvious, but maybe we need to reprioritise things today in our lives – to set time for things that truly matter. When we

reach 90, success won't come from having checked off all the things that we have completed in life. Maybe reprioritising our lives will allow us to invest in the things that really matter. What today in your life really matters – is it being compromised due to other conflicting priorities. God so wants us to use our time wisely. Verse 17 says to not be foolish but understand what the Lord's will is. That's your answer to a purpose filled life – to understand the will of the Lord for you. But how do you know what God's will is for your life, how do you know what his purpose is? Well I believe people get caught in this, waiting and waiting to hear some words from on high, and when it doesn't come they feel stuck. I think it's much more straightforward than that. The answer is to just read your bibles more – here's a few examples of what God wants from our lives – Micah 6:8 'what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God'. So you see you are to live a life that is fair to others, that you demonstrate kindness, that you avoid thinking the world revolves around you. What else – 1 Timothy 2:3&4 'This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, ⁴who wants all people to be saved and to **come to a knowledge of the truth**'. So God's will is that you come to know him more, and how you do that is surrounding yourself every day in scripture. Or what about 1 Thessalonians 5:18 'Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you'. So we are to have a thankful attitude towards everything – that's what he wants to see in your life. You see I think the problem with the world that our children are growing up in is that everything is achievable; it's the 'I want 'culture and 'I get what I want'. We have a tendency to want what's best for me, and only when we have looked after ourselves will we give the remainder maybe to God. That's not God's will. So if we are to walk the Christian life, let's rethink our priorities, let's align to what God wants and let's not waste any time but live with real purpose. So that's the first thing.

And then the second thing that comes from our passage today is that we should live in the Spirit (verses 18-21). Verse 18 says, 'Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery'. Now I'm not going to be a hypocrite at this stage. I enjoy a drink, but having lived with an alcoholic father I know the fine line that exists that can turn drinking alcohol into a dangerous thing. We need to recognise that alcohol can cause people to do very foolish things at times. In Josh's job as a waiter this summer he commented the other evening that he prefers the weddings where people are drinking alcohol. I asked him why, and he said it was because when people get drunk they become a lot more generous with their money, saying 'keep the change', and so Josh's tips are usually much better on nights when people are firing the drinks into them. My mother used to say that when the drink is in, the wit is out, and maybe she was right. Alcohol can create a battle for control in our lives, whereas the only one that should be in control of our lives is the Spirit of God as it says in our reading. A University of Cambridge report showed that there was an increase in Alcohol consumption during the first lockdown as people spent more time at home. The report author stated, 'As COVID-19 remains part of daily life, many of us are turning to alcohol to cope with stress. For many people, drinking in moderation can help with stress relief, but for others it can be more problematic'.

But where we need to turn to for stimulant isn't wine but the Holy Spirit. It's the place where I get hope, where I get direction, where God gives me clear ideas on how I should control my words and my actions. And in verses 19 – 21 Paul gives us 3 signs of the Spirit of God is in control of our lives. He starts in verse 19 about Worship. When the Holy Spirit is in control of my life I will become a worshipper where God is supreme in every aspect of life. Verse 20 tells us that we have a thankful heart. Thankful to God means that I give credit to him for everything. When we are thankful we recall James 1:17 that says 'Every good and

perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights'. We realise that God has blessed us and cares for us. And then the third sign of the Spirit's control on our lives is verse 21 - Mutual submission. Listen to what it says 'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'. That's all about giving dignity and value to everyone around us. You know as a church we say that we reach out and welcome in, but we actually need to start that in our personal lives. We need to be people who are willing to put others' issues before our own. I had someone on the phone yesterday who I haven't spoken to for a year, and the first thing he asked was how is family. He had phoned me looking a favour, but the first thing on his lips was to start by thinking about my needs and not his. A Christian lifestyle means that we remove any control that we might have, and instead submit to others.

So folks, life will throw us plenty of curve balls. We will have many challenges to live through. Society is definitely watching how we live, and we should be distinct from how the world looks on things. But remember that Jesus came to make your life a life of purpose and fulfilment. He said he came to give us abundant life. May that be our desire, that we don't waste this life, filled with God-centred purpose and filled with the Spirit, and may that be our prayer for the young people that we shape.