

One time back when Amy and I were in college at Mankato State, we went on a weekend retreat with a group of students from the Campus Lutheran Chapel. The campground was in the middle of a large, wooded area near Gary, South Dakota, just across the Minnesota border.

Early in the morning on our second day, I went on a run with our pastor and another pastor who was there. Everything was going along fine on our jog, until I decided I wanted to go by myself on my own path in the woods. You see, I was getting a little impatient running behind these two pastors who weren't going quite as fast as I wanted to go. So, I took a little detour from the path thinking I could quicken my pace for a bit and then meet back up with them after a moment or two. Somehow, though things didn't quite work out that way.

I wound up getting "temporarily disorientated." I wasn't "lost" mind you, just "disorientated" ... for a short time... in the middle of the woods... in another state. So, I kept running on my own made-up path, sure that I would either catch back up with those two men or find my own way back to camp, but as time went on it became clearer and clearer that neither of those two things were going to happen anytime soon. After about an hour of jogging around the woods jumping over downed trees, getting scratched up by branches, and almost falling into a dried-out creek bed, I finally got "re-orientated" when I heard a search party calling out my name. Needless to say, it was a huge relief to finally get back to the camp, and especially to Amy who was my girlfriend at the time. Apparently, she had become somewhat concerned during my time of disorientation. Ever since then I have tended to stick closer to clearly marked paths when I'm out running, especially when I'm in unfamiliar territory. I've become much more careful whenever I go running or walking about.

"Look carefully then, how you walk." St. Paul cautions us in our text today. The Lord's apostle gives these important words of warning because if you don't pay close attention to the path that God has set before you in life, you could very well wander off onto a dead-end trail that the devil has set up for your destruction. Sort of like, I got off the

beaten path that early spring morning back in 1992, an experience which thankfully did **not** end in disaster!

So, why **do** we have to be so careful as to how we live our lives as Christians? Because “the days are evil,” Paul says in our text. Christians living in the first century faced many of the same temptations that we face today in the 21st. Back then, just as today, there were certainly the pressures of everyday business and life, which burdened the Christian with worries about things that, in the grand scheme of things, aren’t all that important. In our day, too, it’s easy to get caught up in the busyness of day-to-day life, the tension and the worry of doing everything we believe absolutely has to get done. Whether you’re a student wanting to start off the new school year on the right foot, or if you’re an adult trying to get all your work done on time and pay all the bills, the press and stress of everyday life can be huge and distracting from trusting in God.

St. Paul certainly knew that as he wrote this letter to the Christians living in the city of Ephesus. What’s more, like today, the Ephesian Christians were faced with rampant sexual immorality. It was everywhere around them in their culture and in the pagan religions of their neighbors. Today you just have to turn on the TV or browse through some of websites on your computer or smart phone to be confronted with similar kinds of immorality.

Another challenge to the faith: Like today, the Ephesians were faced with intellectual elitists who pushed their philosophies and laughed at the idea of a physical resurrection from the dead.

If all those temptations were around back in Paul’s day, the Christian walk is even more dangerous today. Jesus and His apostles warned that the world would become even more evil in the last days. “Look carefully how you walk, because the days are evil.”

And then Paul continues, “Not as unwise, but as wise. Making the best use of the time.” Here’s an illustration for that: Here in Minnesota, whenever it’s not winter, we all know what season it is; road construction season! Which almost always include detours. I think many of us see them as a necessary evil. We know roads have to be improved, but still detours are aggravating because they **always** make us take longer, sometimes a

lot longer than, the regular route. ***Detours usually consume a lot of valuable time.*** But are ***we*** unknowingly following some ***unnecessary***, time-consuming detours in our ***spiritual*** lives? It is so easy to get caught up in work, a hobby, a leisure activity, or pursuing sports, (all of which are good gifts from God), that we simply lose track of the time and what our true priority in life should be. And maybe the devil's only purpose is to keep us from spending time growing in our faith by hearing and studying God's Word. In other words, he puts up a detour that in this case ***we don't have to and should not*** follow. Be wise! Stay away from those detours that over-consume your time and keep you from making the most of every opportunity you have to grow in your faith and seek the good of God's kingdom!

Next, Paul provides another example of getting side-tracked. "Do not get drunk on wine, for that is debauchery." Paul is not saying that drinking alcohol is wrong. Like work and leisure activities, every gift from God, taken in moderation, is good. It's when we let something good that God has given us, like wine, or food, to be abused and misused that things start to go wrong.

Consider this, when someone drinks too much, how good are they at keeping an eye on their path? The devil knows all too well that it's harder to say "No" to temptation when excessive alcohol has deadened our good sense and reason. Paul says, "Don't get drunk on wine!" because you won't be watching for the devil's detours and diversions!

We've all made mistakes and sins of one kind or another. Whether it's misusing alcohol or saying things to or about others we shouldn't instead of trying to explain things in the kindest way or complaining about our situation in life rather than trusting God and being thankful for all that He has already given to us. The list of our sins that we think, say, and do every day could go on and on. Isn't it amazing, though, that God still calls us His children? He ***still*** loves us, despite our sins and faults. It's not by our own thinking and choosing that we became His children in the first place. It is only by His great mercy and grace. We have a God Who cares about His people. In Jesus, we have a Savior Who died to forgive our sins and Who now sits on His throne in heaven as our Good Shepherd to

carefully watch over us. When we stray from our course, the Good Shepherd looks for us. He finds us, and when we don't refuse Him, restores us in our walk with God.

Don't ever think that Jesus is going to make you walk this walk *alone!* He will always be with you! He wants you carefully to watch the path before you, to live wisely, because He knows and wants what is best for you.

That's why He encourages us to walk with His Holy Spirit that comes to us through His Word. Paul says, "Do not be foolish but understand what the Lord's will is." It's interesting that Paul puts "foolish" in direct opposition to "understanding the Lord's will." You can be the most intelligent person on the planet, but if you don't know what God's will is, you're actually foolish.

Paul goes on: "Be filled with the spirit." Literally, it's saying *keep on* being filled with the Spirit. If a person is a believer in Jesus, it is because the Holy Spirit has entered that person's heart and created faith there. As a result, everyone who is a believer in Christ is filled with the Spirit of God. Why does Paul say, "*Keep on* being filled with the Spirit?" Here's one way to look at it: Imagine that your heart is like a tank, a gas tank, if you will. Only it doesn't cost you \$50 to fill it up. When you were born, that tank was empty. You had no faith. You didn't have the Spirit of God. But through the Word of God and the water of Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit entered into you and your heart was filled with the Holy Spirit. Your tank is full.

Just like with a gas tank, the human heart can spring a leak. Very easily, in fact, if it's just sitting around and doing nothing, not being nourished by God's Word. Eventually if it's cut off long enough from His Word, the faith will leak out and the Holy Spirit will depart. So, you have to continue to let God's Word fill the tank of your heart with His Spirit-filled Word.

How? Paul tells us: Speak to "one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (19-20)." Another way of putting that is, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." "Make time for devotions in God's Word,

be in worship and you won't get easily sidetracked in your walk with Christ."

I began this sermon with a story about how I once was "disorientated," almost but not quite "lost," because I chose the wrong path on a jog through the woods. Don't get lost, side-tracked, or even disorientated on your Christian walk through life! Choose your paths carefully! Stay away from the devil's detours! Walk with the Spirit and in God's Word. He will keep you safe and secure on your journey and finally bring you to your destination- life everlasting with Him in heaven! Amen.