

BECOMING A PEOPLE OF GRACE

STUDY NINETEEN

The Christian Life 101

Ephesians 5:15–21

Life gets complicated, and things get convoluted. When that happens, it helps to come back to what is absolutely foundational: to get back to the basics.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

IN college catalogs, the number 101 identifies the most foundational course in a subject. For example, Chemistry 101 teaches atomic structure and how molecules bond—the basic information on which all our knowledge about chemistry builds. Without these fundamental keys of understanding, we can't unlock the deeper mysteries of the chemical world.

If the apostle Paul were a college professor, what basics of Christian living would he offer? Ephesians 5:15–21 contains Paul's core principles for being a disciple of Jesus—the essential functions that could be the main subjects for Christian Life 101. Let's enroll in Paul's class and learn about Christian living at the “molecular” level—the most basic level of understanding where we discover five keys for following Jesus.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Studying Scripture is like mining for gold. With a bit of effort, we can uncover great eternal truths. Take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the valuable nuggets of spiritual wisdom in the Bible using this simple prayer from the psalmist.

*Open my eyes to see
the wonderful truths in your instructions. (Psalm 119:18)*



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

The Christian Life 101

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TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In the *Searching the Scriptures* method, Pastor Chuck Swindoll encourages reading the Bible slowly and thoughtfully.¹ Read *Ephesians 5:15–21* with a receptive heart and try to identify Paul’s five main points which he lists as positive commands: “be careful,” “make the most,” “understand,” “be filled,” and “submit.”



Observation: Five Essentials for Christian Living

Good observation looks for the how, when, what, why, and who of a passage. Let’s start with the *how* question, as we examine Paul’s first command, “be careful.”

“Be Careful How You Walk”—Ephesians 5:15 NASB

Paul frequently uses the word, *walk*, as a metaphor for our behavior. How did Paul say we must conduct ourselves, according to *Ephesians 5:15*?

Earlier, Paul prayed that God would give us “spiritual wisdom and insight” (Ephesians 1:17). In this section, Paul urged us to put our God-given wisdom into practice. We must “be careful,” like tightrope walkers who concentrate only on one step at a time, focusing on the moment and not the destination. *How* they walk is crucial. They must be centered, balanced, composed, prudent, and wise. Acting like a fool on the highwire would certainly lead to a fall!



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What would you say a “careful” and “wise” Christian does to focus on the present?

Some of us have learned by walking in the wrong way that there are consequences. Why didn't we think before we stumbled into peril? Be careful how you walk.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

“Make the Most of Every Opportunity”—Ephesians 5:16

Paul’s next command considers *when* to act wisely. What did Paul advise, according to [Ephesians 5:16](#)? The Amplified Bible offers an expanded translation to help with your observations ([Ephesians 5:16](#)).

The best time to act wisely is now, not tomorrow or when the mood strikes or when life isn’t so hectic. What qualities do you think are necessary for making the most of our time? And why did Paul say it is vital to use our time well?



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Are you making the most of your opportunities? Are you applying the discipline and discernment to invest those opportunities well? —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

“Understand What the Lord Wants You to Do”—Ephesians 5:17

So far, we’ve learned how to walk: carefully and wisely. And we’ve learned when to act wisely: at every opportunity. Now then, *what* must wise people do, according to [Ephesians 5:17](#)?

One of the most basic tasks of discipleship is decision-making, which is a thoughtful process of understanding and obeying God’s will. Commentator John Stott divides God’s will into two categories: God’s “general” will and God’s “particular” will. He elaborates:

The former is so called because it relates to the generality of his people and is the same for all of us, *e.g.* to make us like Christ. His particular will, however, . . . is different for each of us, *e.g.* what career we shall follow, whether we should marry, and if so whom.²

God communicates His general will in Scripture, and we discover it through prayer, reading, learning from teachers, and Bible study. What additional strategies do you think are necessary for discerning God’s *particular* will, which may not be as straightforward?

A key element in decision-making is sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s leading. Next, Paul addresses the fundamentals of how we relate to the Spirit who indwells all believers.



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Seek the counsel of people you admire in the Christian life who are objective and who have nothing to gain or lose in your decision. Then, wait. Listen. Then obey.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

“Be Filled with the Holy Spirit”—Ephesians 5:18–20

A helpful analogy regarding the Spirit’s role in our lives is driving a car. We may know where God wants us to go and have gas in the tank, but we still must start the engine for the car to move. Otherwise, we don’t move forward and we have to get out and push! What must we do to engage the Spirit’s power, according to Paul in *Ephesians 5:18*?

We’ll examine the meaning of “be filled” in the interpretation phase. For now, can you observe the three evidences of the Holy Spirit’s influence in *Ephesians 5:19–20*?

Why do we praise the Lord and give thanks? Because of the abiding influence of the Holy Spirit. The more we are “filled” with the Spirit, the more our hearts sing!



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*Wouldn't it be great if all of us in the body of Christ were Spirit-filled at the same time?
There would only be giving thanks and harmonious relationships that are balanced and fun.
What a wonderful way to live! —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*

“Submit to One Another”—Ephesians 5:21


Paul’s final lesson in Christian Life 101 concerns the *who* issue. Our walk with God affects not only our private world but also our relational world. Our guide is Jesus, who humbly served others and teaches us to do the same. According to *Ephesians 5:21*, what was Paul’s rule of thumb for healthy relationships? How did Jesus model this way of relating? And how does treating others as Jesus would treat them show reverence to Him?

Paul’s five fundamentals for Christian living address basic issues of conduct, time, decision-making, control, and submission to one another. Before measuring our walk by these yardsticks, let’s look a little closer at the meaning of “be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18).



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 **Interpretation: The Meaning of “Be Filled with the Holy Spirit”**

Paul contrasted “be filled with the Holy Spirit” with “do not get drunk with wine” (Ephesians 5:18). Both being filled and getting drunk refer to control or influence—but the instrument of control could not be more opposite, along with the effects. In the following chart, we’ve listed some negative characteristics of drunkenness. Fill in what you think might be the contrasting positive attributes of being Spirit-filled in the right column.

Characteristics of Drunkenness	Characteristics of Being Filled with the Spirit
Out of control	
Deadened senses	
Confused thinking	
Depressant	
Undignified and humiliating behavior	
Ruined life	

When the Spirit fills us, our minds are clear to see the full scope of Christ’s love for us, and we overflow with praise, “making music to the Lord in [our] hearts” (5:19). The Spirit awakens our spirits in communion with God, and we experience a kind of joy that can’t be found in a bottle.



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How are we filled by the Spirit? In one sense, we already are filled. The Holy Spirit indwells all believers like fuel in a car's gas tank, and our spiritual tank never needs refilling! What did Paul teach about the Spirit's indwelling earlier in his letter (Ephesians 1:13–14)?

In 5:18, Paul had in mind another sense of the term, *filled*. What did Paul mean? Use your Bible study sources to find an answer, including Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Galatians, Ephesians*. For an online resource, consult [Constable's Notes](http://netbible.org) at netbible.org.

How are we filled with the Spirit? The answer lies in our yielding control to the Spirit and walking by His power. Paul offers some further insights into this process in his letter to the Galatians.



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Correlation: Walking by the Holy Spirit

Read the following verses about walking by the Holy Spirit and write down what Paul is teaching about how the Spirit influences our lives.

Galatians 5:16

5:18, 22–23

5:25

When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, He guides us away from sin, grows in us fruitful qualities that only He can produce, and influences every part of our lives for good. Pause for prayer and tell the Father that you need the Spirit to guide, grow, and influence you right now.



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Application: Putting the Fundamentals into Practice

What are your current circumstances? Perhaps you're struggling in your job or in a relationship, or maybe you face a major life decision. Let's review Professor Paul's basic principles by answering the following test questions.

Conduct Test

Can you find a way to walk more carefully and wisely? If so, what changes might you need to make to focus more intently on the next step?

Time Test

How are you using your time? If you realize that you're producing less and procrastinating more, what can you do today to make the most of the opportunity in front of you?



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Decision-making Test

Do you need to consult God’s Word and wise, Christian counsel regarding an important decision? Do you need to set aside time for prayer and listening to God? What can you do today to move forward in making this decision?

Control Test

Have you yielded to the Holy Spirit and invited Him to manage the circumstances you can’t handle? Ask Him to take control and produce His fruit in you: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Submission Test

In what ways can you honor and serve others, not with a “me-first” attitude but with a submissive “you-first” attitude?



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These five tests conclude the imaginary course, Christian Life 101. However, Paul's principles live on. When life gets complicated and you don't know what to do, get back to Paul's basics. These fundamentals of Christian living will see you through.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, please help me to navigate the storms of life with the simple tools You offer in Your Word. Christ is my north star, the Spirit is the wind in my sails, Your Word is my rudder and keel, and You are at the helm. Navigate me through the narrow passage of life with Your wise counsel, keep me from the jagged rocks of sin, and guide me to Your haven of peace. Amen!

ENDNOTES

1. To learn more about Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 203.

