

Making the Most of Every Opportunity

Ephesians 5:15-16

Pastor Paul Naumann

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In the name of Jesus, who died for us that we might live for Him, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Anyone who has ever gone golfing knows how frustrating that game can be at times. It is a difficult game to play properly, and even professional golfers often have poor rounds; they lose their concentration, they don't try hard enough, or, sometimes, they try too hard. If a golfer doesn't hit the ball squarely, it might just roll off in front of the tee, or fly straight up in the air, or slice off to one side of the fairway. Then the golfer gets angry, and tries to make up for his mistake by hitting his next shot twice as hard. Often he makes another mistake, and another, and gets angrier and angrier as the frustrating cycle continues. P.G.A. professional Lee Trevino once said that he was a poor golfer up until the day that he learned this single most important lesson of golf: you have to play every shot as if it were the whole game. This idea holds true in many sports, and in a way, it can also be applied to our lives as Christians. Each day, each moment in our lives brings us new opportunities to "live for Christ." The message of our text is an encouragement from the Apostle Paul to grab onto those moments and make the most of them. Our theme today, then, is:

"MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY OPPORTUNITY"

The Bible tells us that every Christian, when he comes to faith, becomes the "temple of the Holy Spirit." That means that the Holy Spirit lives right inside you, guiding your life and your actions! It would be nice if that were the only spirit at work inside you—then you'd never miss a single opportunity to serve God. It would be like being a golfer who hits a hole in one every time! Unfortunately, that's not the way we are. There's something else inside of us Christians that keeps tugging us away from God. Paul saw it clearly in himself, as he says to the Romans, "*I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members...*" Rom 7:22-23.

It's like Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde—each Christian is both a saint and a sinner! God has revealed to us His will for our lives, and He's given us the faith so that we actually want to do His will. But our sinful human nature is always in there slugging. It tries to turn us from God's will and make us serve ourselves and our own sinful desires. That's why we have to confess with Luther's explanation to the Second Article, "We daily sin much, and indeed deserve nothing but punishment." When we look back on our lives, we know that we've missed a lot of shots, every single day, God offers us new horizons, new ways in which we can serve Him, and every day we seem to find some way to blow it; we miss many of those opportunities. For just a brief second, our flesh tugs us the other way, and another chance is gone. As one writer put it, the sinful flesh is "like a heavy bear," that follows a Christian around and hangs over his back, weighing him down. With St. Paul we have to admit, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" Rom 7:18-19.

This sinful nature spread from Adam to all men, like some kind of hereditary disease. It's incurable, too—we'll never be completely rid of it as long as we live. But like many incurable diseases, it can be conquered and controlled! The sacrament of Baptism is a picture of how we do that. What happens at a baptism? A person has his sins washed away, using water and the Word. Even though he may be the tiniest infant, God gives that person faith. The sinful nature is drowned, and the Holy Spirit becomes the controlling factor in his life. And, Luther tells us, that's a picture of how we keep controlling our sinful nature throughout our

lives. By drowning it in daily contrition and repentance. By turning away from our sin every day, and turning toward our God for forgiveness.

At the end of the day, when you sit down on the edge of your bed to say your prayers, you have to admit that you've done wrong, not only by doing bad things, but also by not doing good things—by not making the most of every opportunity to serve God. But after you're done saying "I'm sorry" for not being a perfect servant of God, next you can say "thank you." "Thank you, kind Father, for sending Jesus down to earth."

Jesus is the reason we can make the most of each new opportunity. Because of Him, we have forgiveness for all the old ones that we've missed! He gives us perfect pardon—total forgiveness—every time we turn to Him in repentance.

Do you know what the most important teaching in the Bible is? It's the doctrine of Vicarious Atonement. That's a fancy name for the Bible fact that Christ lived and died as our substitute. The Law demands that we lead perfect lives, living up to all the commandments, never varying an inch from the rule. But our sinful nature keeps tugging us off the line. So God sent Jesus. He was a perfect servant; He did keep all the commandments perfectly, as our substitute. Isn't it amazing? Jesus lived out every day perfectly; he never blew a single opportunity...to bring the grace of God to man. The Law demands that payment be made for the sins we commit—a high price, one that we could never hope to cover. So God sent Jesus. He paid the price by suffering and dying as our substitute, offering His own life as a ransom for us. He died, so that we won't ever have to die. "For just as through the disobedience of the one man Adam, the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man Christ, the many will be made righteous." Rom 5:19.

Ye Christians, one and all, rejoice! Each of you has a place reserved in heaven with your name on it. God is waiting for you! And nothing can change that because Jesus made the reservations Himself—it's all paid for. But while we're still waiting here on earth, God has some advice for us, "Be very careful how you live. Make the most of every opportunity!" Don't worry about the past, it's gone—and so, for Jesus' sake, are your sins. God forbids you to worry about the future, as Jesus said to His disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes." The past is gone, and the future is in God's hands. All you have to be concerned about is what you're going to do now, the next moment. What are you planning to do the next moment? Will you use it to serve God, or to serve your sinful nature?

Celebrate God's grace to you! Revel in the free and overwhelming gift of forgiveness. Every time you turn around, you are going to have a new chance to reflect the way that God has smiled on you, by smiling at others with real Christian care and concern. So make the most of every opportunity—play each shot as if it were the whole game! Because of Jesus, this is one game you just can't lose. As the hymnist once said,

*Knowing Thee and Thy salvation
Grateful love dare never cease
To proclaim Thy tender mercies
Gracious Lord, Thy heav'nly peace.
Sound we forth the gospel tidings
To the earth's remotest bound
That the sinner has be pardoned
And forgiveness can be found! **Amen.***