

**“Things for Which We Want to Be Known”**

**Ephesians 5:15–20**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

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I have told some of you about an experience I had years ago at a CBF General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas. The meeting was over, I had checked out of my motel and I was waiting for a taxi to take me to the airport. I ended up sharing a small sedan with four other CBF attendees — a BTSR student I knew, a campus minister and a nice older couple. We crammed our luggage in the trunk and climbed into the car.

As we began the thirty-minute drive to the airport, I had a great conversation with our driver who was from Liberia. I knew ministers in Liberia. So, we had much to talk about. As we talked and drove along on the freeway, we heard a sudden loud sound – bam! “What was that?” the driver asked me. “I don’t know,” I replied. So, he pulled over to check, and as it turned out, the bam was the sound of a tire going flat. It was not completely flat, the driver said, we could make it to the airport.

So, back on the freeway we went, but the conversation shifted. Various ones of us had different amounts of time until our planes departed. My friend from BTSR had the earliest flight and thus asked, “Do you think he has a spare tire?” I thought back to the experience of cramming our luggage in the trunk and had my doubts. So, I asked our driver and he replied, “Spare tire? Ha, ha, ha... no, no, no, I don’t have a spare tire... But we’re okay.” he said. About that time, we heard another loud sound — bam! This time the tire was completely flat.

The driver pulled over again, we all got out and stood in the emergency lane. The driver called his office and they promised to send another vehicle while he awaited a spare tire, but those with earlier flights began to worry. We did not have to wait long. Almost immediately a man in a pick-up truck stopped and asked if he could help. My friend from BTSR gladly accepted a ride to the airport. The rest of us wondered what we would do, but again, almost immediately a young woman in a Honda Accord stopped and offered to help.

Since the older couple's flight was next, they walked to the car. The woman talked to them for a moment but then they backed away awkwardly. The woman motioned for me to come near. So, I did. She said she was going to give the older couple a ride to the airport and the rest of us, too, but she needed me to put the beer she had just bought in the trunk. It was unopened, and in a bag, but she said the older couple seemed uncomfortable with it there. "They must be Baptist," she said, "Could you put it in the trunk? And have one, if you like."

Well, I learned a number of things in that moment. There are Good Samaritans in Texas. That's good to know. It may not be wise to share a taxi with too many people, especially a small taxi with bad tires and no room for a spare. But most of all, I learned that I did not look like a Baptist, and I took comfort in that knowledge.

To be clear, I am unashamed of my calling as a Christian minister and a Baptist one at that. It's just that the first impression many people have of us is not very positive. Baptists especially are the people who are against anything that even looks like it might be fun. I referenced Grumpy from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in a recent sermon as saying that females are full of wicked wives. He is asked what wicked wives are, and he replies. "I don't know, but I'm agin' 'em." Grumpy fits a caricature of Baptists at our worst.

Our reading from Ephesians may seem to justify this caricature. "Don't get drunk with wine, which is debauchery..." the author says and we can almost hear the bells going off. Don't, don't, don't – whoever wrote this book, whether the Apostle Paul or a student of his, must have been the first Baptist. But there is more to this text than meets the eye, and there is certainly more to who we are as Christians and Baptists.

We need to begin by noting that there are things we are and should be against, and the abuse of any substance, including alcohol, is one of them. This is what the author is talking about – not drinking wine, Jesus does this on a daily basis, but abusing wine, getting drunk. He also contrasts abuse with being filled with the Spirit. "Be filled with the Spirit, not just wine," he seems to be saying, "Don't consume your life with escape, but fill it with purpose." The message seems clear.

Substance abuse is a devastating reality, more of a mental health concern than a moral or spiritual one, though there are moral and spiritual dimensions to decisions that are made. I make this distinction because overemphasizing the moral side of this issue can present a barrier to healing. People who are hurting get lost in judgment. What we need are paths to healing, especially as opioid addiction has grown and the pandemic has intensified every kind of mental health challenge. We have offered education herein and have hosted support groups for a long time. In no way should we make light of this realm of concern.

But we are and should be against a number of other things. We are against injustice of any kind — racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, the abuse of the earth. We are against the caricature of immigrants and refugees and the lumping together of all Muslims as terrorists, which is a violation of the ninth commandment — you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. We are against gun violence and the abuse of animals. We are against bullying and harassment. We are against anything that diminishes life, anything that dishonors God, anything that devalues God's creation. Surely some things are okay to be against.

A number of years ago, I was part of an interfaith grass roots organization in Winston-Salem that was against the closing of a safety net healthcare delivery site. We were willing to help the community address the challenges of keeping the place open, and we did that, but the first thing we had to do was stop the closure. Sometimes it is necessary to oppose an action so as to make possible another one.

Last year our deacons put up banners outside the church to offer support to protestors who were addressing the different treatment persons of color often experience at the hands of law enforcement and the entire legal system in this nation. At the same time, we offered hospitality to the law enforcement personnel protecting the downtown community during the protests. We did not lump together all law enforcement people. We simply said we are against the kind of racism that led to the killing of George Floyd. We are against some things.

But what we are for is more important. Some years ago, a potential new professor came to talk to a group of adjunct faculty

members at Wake Forest University Divinity School. She was an Afro-Feminist and quite insightful. Her presentation was on non-starters in multicultural dialogue, turn-offs for African-American churches. This information was helpful, though much of it was familiar to me. After she finished her presentation, she asked what questions we had, and after thanking her for helpful insights, I asked what some starters might be, what would help the dialogue? Sadly, she had no suggestions.

It is helpful to know what not to do, but it is even more helpful to know what to do. The author of Ephesians talks not only about not living as unwise people but living as wise people, understanding what the will of the Lord is. It is a theme that runs through our texts today. The psalmist says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. In the reading from 1 Kings, Solomon asks for an understanding mind so as to discern between good and evil. Now the author of Ephesians counsels us to do the same — not just to avoid foolish ways, but to seek wise ways.

What are these? What is the will of the Lord for us? Anything that enhances life, anything that honors God, anything that values God's creation. We are talking about things like love and kindness, gentleness and compassion, extending grace to others, seeking reconciliation and peace, doing the right things which are the things Jesus teaches us to do as we seek to make our loves for God and neighbor our priority.

To be more precise, the wife of a pastor I worked with in another setting said you can tell who the Christians are by noticing who lets you out in busy traffic... Well, I'm not sure how many of us would fall on the right side of the ledger if this were the sole measure of faithfulness, I'm not sure this is an adequate lens through which to assess our lives, but it is a move in the right direction. The calling to follow Jesus in ways of love and kindness applies to our daily lives, how we treat people around us. We don't want to be like the man who forgot that he put a bumper sticker on his truck which read, "Honk If You Love Jesus," and then extended his middle finger to the person driving past him who honked his horn. We want to treat people with gentleness and respect, not just when we are at church, but in every part of our lives. This is what we want to be known for as Baptists and as Christians.

We want to be known as the people who clothe thousands every year. We want to be known as the people who extend hospitality at the Christmas parade. We want to be known as the church that helps people through the Mike Morris Fellowship Fund, the church that started the give-back BBQ food truck. We want to be known as the people who host First Night events as a service to the community. We want to be known as the people who host support groups and help immigrants. We want to be known as a church that has taken seriously our safety and the safety of others throughout this pandemic. There are things for which we would like to be known — not just being against certain things, but being for certain things, mostly people and community and love.

I think of the day of Elizabeth Edwards' funeral at Edenton Street United Methodist Church. It was in December, 2010, the day of Toy Joy that year. It was going to be a crowded block as it was, but the added challenge was that members of Westboro Baptist Church from Topeka came to protest. They were given space on the corner of Salisbury and Edenton Streets, in front of our sign. The counter-protest group, a much larger group, was given space across Edenton Street.

The Westboro church is known for its inflammatory hate speech against a wide range of people including Jews, Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox believers, LGBT people and U.S. soldiers and politicians. Whatever your leanings, these folks condemn them, and they show up at funerals of people they want to condemn. The latter reality especially is mindboggling for people who claim the name Christian, and Baptist.

An N&O reporter came to do a story on the Westboro protesters, but some of our folks steered her toward the leaders of Toy Joy, and she ended up writing a powerful story simply painting the picture of what was happening on that street — less than a dozen people claiming to be Christian screaming hateful things, a much larger diverse crowd denouncing their hatred, and then over a thousand children receiving Christmas gifts from over a hundred volunteers at our church. What was the story here? Was it about a few narrowminded people screaming hateful things or so many more extending love and kindness? Clearly it was the latter, and that is something for which we want to be known.