

Following the Instructions
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Ephesians 5:15-20

Sometimes I wish there were better instructions in this life. Don't you?

I just returned yesterday from my 11th time deaning at Silver Lake Conference Center, our church's outdoor ministry facility in Sharon, CT. This year, I co-led a group of 32 seventh, eighth and ninth graders. My partner in this endeavor was Ashley Levins, a young adult who grew up at MCC, spent many years on summer camp staff, and is now in grad school. Together, we managed a staff of four very patient and kind volunteer counselors.

I don't have to tell you that living a full week with a group of middle school aged young people that we don't know yet is both exhilarating and exhausting.

Part of it is the age of the campers... think back to what you were like at age 12-13-14... was your adolescence a walk in the park? Of course it wasn't!

I also believe that part of it is directly related to the experience, training and ability of those of us at the top – the deans.

To be an effective dean, you must first learn all their names... not just the ones they registered with, but the ones they call themselves.

Once you get to know them, you are better equipped to make a quick decision about how a camper is holding up... what warrants a trip to the nurse and what might be just homesickness in disguise?

Once you have earned their trust and respect, you then must be able to inspire them to wear closed toed shoes so that they might avoid injury, especially towards the end of the week when everyone is tired and walking like zombies.

Along the way, you must learn how much time it will take all 38 of us to walk from our site to the next activity, factoring in a little extra time for those who will need to go to the restroom on the way or put on sun screen. You must be on time because there are staff members waiting on the other side of camp who will give them an awesome experience at the waterfront or the ceramic studio (and you might even catch a short break!)

It would be awesome if there was a comprehensive manual at camp that offered all this information. Some of these items can surely be written down, organized and presented in such a manner that future volunteers can learn what worked (and didn't work) for us and apply that knowledge to their situation. Maybe someday we'll get there.

But there are other judgement calls that need to be made at God Camp... How far do you push those discussion questions you wrote that are falling flat before you change their format?

How many times should you whisper "hush" to the ones who never quit talking during devotions?

What do you do when it rains so hard that you need a plan "b" for high ropes, you know, something you can do inside that is equal to repelling off a 200 year old tree?

Yes, it would be nice to have better instructions in this life, but I wonder... could they ever really be complete?

Today, the apostle Paul offers us some brief words of advice that seem to read like an instruction manual. And perhaps they are not complete. But they are pretty useful.

These ancient pearls of wisdom were given to the church in Ephesus long ago to help bring about a sense of order, health and wholeness to one faith community that was struggling. Since Paul spends so much time in the letter addressing the issues of congregational hostility, division and self-interest, many scholars believe that the church was struggling with unity.

Of course, you know that we are still struggling with many of these things today – as individuals and as churches. I think the saying goes “there’s not much that is new under the sun”. But just for today, let’s take a moment to dig deeper and see what wisdom we can glean from these words.

Paul’s first instruction is to live wisely, especially when it comes to how we choose to spend our time. Social scientists suggest that an average person’s schedule today is fuller than at any other time period in history. We know that part of our daily to-do list should include quality time alone with God and with our family, ministry opportunities, as well as our regular work and recreation routines.

But many of us have a hard time taking that time. We discount the need for rest and renewal, thinking that just another hour on the conference call will wrap things up so that we can breathe deep and be present with our loved ones. I get that, because I struggle with it too. But it’s scriptural, folks... on the seventh day, God rested. We should too.

Paul’s second instruction is to try and understand the will of the God in our lives. Many times we are unsure about the big decisions in this life. Which school should we attend or what job should we pursue? Or, we might be thinking about how to meaningfully engage and support the work of justice, equality, reconciliation and peace.

When we are able to take the time to pray about it, talk with those we trust, and consider how our life may change with the choice we are about to make, we might determine a path. At least, that seems like the most effective way to decide.

Paul’s final instruction in our epistle reading is to be open to being filled with the Holy Spirit so that we might speak with joy to one another, hold joy in our hearts, and give thanks to God. This ‘joy’ thing is probably the one that I struggle with the most. For me, joy can seem slippery and far away... it’s difficult to grab on to.

Feeling joy in the midst of grief, sorrow or pain can seem empty, fake or shallow. It helps to remember that we all face challenges, some quite deep and life-altering and others perhaps less so. Maybe that's why Paul cautions against trying to create our joy by imbibing to excess... doing so may bring good cheer temporarily, but it can also lead to a mighty big headache in the morning.

Just as following an instruction manual can lead to success in assembling something complicated, following Paul's instructions for a balanced life with God can help us remain connected and grounded to the One who loves us so. Amen.