

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)¹⁰ and find out what pleases the Lord.¹¹ Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.¹² For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.¹³ But everything exposed by the light becomes visible,¹⁴ for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Ephesians 5:8-14)

Live As Children of Light!

People sometimes ask me what it was like to be a missionary in South America. Colombia has a very different culture. While I lived there, I taught classes at a girls' school. In that environment, we saw many differences between the two countries. One of the very noticeable differences was the way we were treated. Whenever I would walk into a classroom, all the girls would stand up and say, in unison, “Good morning, pastor.” In fact, one of the other missionaries would sometimes tease the girls and step in and out and back into their classroom, while they stood up and sat down over and over again. To us Americans, that formality took some getting used to. Another example was greetings. In Colombia, when you greet a person of the opposite sex whom you know reasonably well, you kiss each other on the cheek. As a Midwestern American, the only woman I regularly kiss is my wife. But things work differently there.

Why are those customs so different? Because that's the way their culture is. And parents pass it on to their children. Some of it, they do deliberately. Parents teach their children to do the things that Colombian society insists on. But some of it, the kids pick up just by watching. Just as our children do. We try to teach our children to be polite as we understand it. But so much of the way they talk and think and feel they absorb by watching us. That process lies behind St. Paul's words to us this morning. Today, he speaks to us as if we were all children, being taught the right way to live. Because we are. We are God's children. Today, God tells us, **Live as children of light.**

I.

Paul says, **“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”** He's talking about coming to faith. Before we were believers, we were “darkness.” Now we're “light in the Lord.” Does that sound right to you? I mean, does it sound like your experience? It was easy for the Ephesians to see their own lives reflected in what Paul was saying because almost all of them had been unbelievers until the day that Paul came and told them about Jesus. They could look at the lives they used to live and say, “Before we knew Jesus, it was all a real waste. Now, everything is different.” Is it as easy for us to see the changes God has made? Maybe not. Probably only a few of us here today came to faith as adults. Those few may remember living a life that was “darkness” but my guess is that most of us have been Christians almost all our lives. So the change may not seem nearly as dramatic as it was for these pagans who were living according to the sinful flesh when God sent the gospel to them and changed their lives.

But you know what? What Paul says here about the Ephesians is true for every Christian. Once we were darkness, now we are light in the Lord. Even if we were baptized as babies, before the light of Christ shined on us we were darkness. There was no light in our hearts. There was no spark of goodness in our souls. We were evil sinners who belonged to the devil. All that we did satisfied those evil desires. “Wait a minute!” you might protest. “I wasn't perfect, but I wasn't that bad!” That's the darkness talking. God doesn't see any shades of gray. Everything is black and white to him. Either we belong to him or we don't. God's verdict on us before we were believers is that we were darkness. There was no spiritual understanding in us. There was no natural goodness in us. We were evil and we were doomed to hell.

But God made us light in the Lord. That was a two step process. Step one was sending Jesus to pay for the darkness we were born with. Every other human baby was conceived in sin. But Jesus was holy and perfect. He lived a life of true light, of true faith and devotion to God. He offered that righteous life to God as the payment for our sin. He died on the cross. He suffered hell. He took our place. God accepted Jesus as if he were you and me. God poured his wrath and anger out on the Lord. When it was all done, we were paid for. God demonstrated that by raising Jesus from the dead. All that was step one.

Step two was getting us to trust Jesus. God sent the gospel to us in baptism. God sent the gospel to us in the testimony of friends or co-workers. God sent the gospel to us and we heard it from our mothers who taught us to sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know." We heard it from Sunday School teachers and pastors. We heard it and the Holy Spirit reached into our hearts and did a miracle. In the natural darkness of our hearts he created light, the light of faith. That act of God's grace changed everything for us. Now we are not only sinners. Now we belong to God. God has recreated us. He put a new man in our hearts who seeks the Lord and who serves him day and night. Paul appeals to that new man today and says, **"Live as children of light."**

Now, our lives are different. The fruit of the light is goodness, righteousness and truth. Truth should be a simple concept, but we Americans make it quite difficult. We make it subjective. What's true for you might not be true for me. That's nonsense. Jesus is the truth. Truth doesn't change. Truth is everything God says. We speak what is true and we act in a way that shows integrity. We live up to our ideas. Righteousness means to live in a way that conforms to God's law. God can look at us and declare that we are not guilty. Goodness finally means to work for the benefit of others. It implies a humility that puts myself in second place and God and his people ahead of me.

Paul tells us that it's our job to learn what all this means in our day to day lives. He says, **"Find out what pleases the Lord."** The Greek word for "find out" implies that we carefully examine everything we do, every day of our lives, to determine if we're really leading a God pleasing life. How do I act at work or at school? Does my attitude please God? Does my commitment to being a faithful student or a faithful employee please God? Or am I selfish and self absorbed? Do I only care about me? What about my relationship to my family? Do I put them ahead of myself? Are their needs more important than my needs? Or do I treat my spouse or my parents or my children like they're here to serve me? What about my attitude toward church? Is it important? Do I make an effort to pay attention when I'm here or do I stare at my hands and think about other things and wish it would get over? And what attitude do I teach my children about church? About catechism class? About faith in general? Is it clear that God's word is supposed to come first? Or do I allow them to think that hockey practice or making money or being popular are at least as important as God and his word?

We have to find out what pleases God. What pleases God is devotion to him. That is a lifelong discipline. Are we committed to that discipline? Or do we make our faith a once a week deal? Do we want a kind of comfortable Christianity that never really upsets things too much? My friends, true faith means constant examination of who we are and how we live. Are we committed to that path of faith? If not, why not?

Simply put, because we're sinners. It's a constant struggle to stay on the path of light because the darkness we were born with is still there. But every day, we come to our Savior and admit our sins to him and plead for his mercy. Jesus came because our faith is weak. Jesus came because our hearts are darkness. Jesus came because we sinners fail to follow him. He took all that sin away. As his called servant, I forgive you all your sin and laziness and lack of commitment. But the response of faith is not to say, "Oh, good. Now I don't have to worry about doing that any more." The response of faith is to be light in the Lord. It's to dedicate ourselves to learning each day what it means to follow Christ. Even if we spend a hundred years studying what pleases God, we will always have more to learn. But in faith we keep on learning because God has made us different. That's Paul's point today. **Live as children of light. Reflect the change God has made in you.**

II.

You are not darkness anymore. We still struggle with darkness. The darkness in our hearts wages unrelenting warfare against the light of faith. But the light has already won. We already belong to Jesus. That leads us to separate ourselves from the forces of evil in this life. Paul says, **"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them."**

The deeds of darkness are fruitless: nothing beneficial comes from them. We live in a time which does not understand this truth. We're constantly bombarded with the idea that we need more stuff – we need newer cars and fancier houses and our kids need Wii systems and computers and cash. Our society believes that we need to be entertained constantly – movies and TV and the internet are not nearly enough. To keep us paying attention, those media outlets become racier and racier. The message of our society is that you need to indulge your most basic desires. Young people should sleep together after three dates. Why not? If it feels good, do it. The message only gets worse from there. Guess what? None of this is new. The devil has been using the same tactics for thousands of years. You know why he never changes them? Because they work. Paul says simply, **"For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret."**

God calls us to make a clean break with the influences in our society that lead us toward sin. Now that doesn't mean that he calls us to leave the world. He doesn't call us to move into a monastery and shut everything out. We still send our kids to school. We still go to work. He doesn't even tell us we have to toss out our TV sets. But he does tell us to have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness. Sadly, far too many Christians seem to think that they can skate right up to the edge and look over. Far too many Christians think they can play with fire because they think they know what their limit is. They let the devil tease them, because they think they're strong enough not to give in. But just letting the devil tease you is taking a step into his darkness. Because he leads us away from God, little by little, God tells us to completely avoid those attitudes. God tells us to flee from temptation.

In fact, he tells us to expose those attitudes for what they are: sin and rebellion against God. We should not be afraid to be different from the rest of society. Now, that won't make us popular. But faith is not a popularity contest. Faith is trusting in Jesus. Faith lives in the light of Christ. The truth is, the more you study God's Word and understand what he wants, the more sensitive your conscience will become. Things you used to think were OK, you will avoid as sin and danger. As you explore what God really says, as you grow in your understanding of the attitudes he is looking for and the way that he defines love, then you will recognize that attitudes you held are really contrary to what God says in his Word. The more we understand how God looks at us, the more we find in ourselves and in our lives that we need to change. We expose our sinful attitudes and practices to the light of Christ.

That isn't a bad thing. It's part of the radical change that took place when God made us believers. Paul quotes what appears to be an ancient Christian hymn to encourage the change that must take place in our lives. He says, **“Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”** Until the Holy Spirit gave us faith, we were sleeping. We were dead. We were as far from God as we could be. But when the gospel wakes us up and we rise from spiritual death, then we live in the light of Christ. My friends, you now live in the light of Christ. You are now light in the Lord. God calls you now to separate yourselves from the influences of darkness. To flee from those temptations which trip you up over and over again. To grow in your knowledge of his Word so that you can grow in living your faith. **Live as children of light. Separate yourself for the forces of evil.**

We are children – God's children. Each day that we are here we're growing. We're learning what it means to live as children of light. It means that we live by the faith that God has given us. It means that we avoid sin and evil. May God lead you to live in his light. Amen.