

Walk as Children of Light

Ephesians 5:3-14

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But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live [walk] as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said:

*"Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."*

A group of people got stuck in an elevator during a power failure. At first, they panicked in the dark. Then one man remembered he had a tiny flashlight in his pocket. When he turned it on, they weren't afraid anymore. During the forty-five minutes they were stuck there, they told jokes, laughed, and even sang. Just a little light can make a difference in the darkness

(<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1995/november/1184.html>).

In this part of Ephesians, Paul uses the classic contrast of light vs. darkness to describe life as Christians. Christians living as God's holy people

stand out from the world. There are differences between people who are devoted to Christ and people who aren't. In its rebellion against God and rejection of God's ways and refusal of God's salvation in Christ, the world is in darkness. But those who surrender to God, seek to follow God's ways, and receive God's gift in Christ are in the light. We're not only in the light, but we're to become lights revealing God's grace. We're to walk as children of light.

There are many passages in Scripture that refer to God's light and presence and walking in God's light, so Paul had a lot to draw on. But the important point is that he uses this image of light and darkness to encourage these Christians to live as God's people and to avoid what's improper for God's people.

A good bit of what he says here has to do with sexuality. Those first century Christians were living in a culture that said pretty much anything goes as far as sexual experience and behavior. Maybe it was a lot like our popular culture today. And while talking about this may be uncomfortable, if the church doesn't speak a clear word, we let the culture have its way. And Paul reminds us that the culture doesn't promote God's way of thinking and behaving and relating to each other.

God created the world. God created us, including our bodies. Our bodies are part of God's good creation. Sex is part of God's good creation. As creator, God tells us how he intends sex to be experienced. Marriage, a lifelong committed bond of a woman and a man, is God's intention for sexual intimacy. Now, we live in a fallen world. We're broken and we sin. But there's grace and mercy, forgiveness and new beginnings offered when we fail to live up to God's intention. But the intention is still there and the call to purity and faithfulness remains.

How we think and even talk about such things is important. We're to replace obscene, foolish, and coarse talk with thanksgiving. We're thankful to God as Creator and we're thankful for God's good creation. Even though creation is messed up, there's still good in it. God still offers a way to experience creation's goodness and God's good gifts in creation even while we wait for the final redemption and restoration of creation to God's purpose.

Paul reminds those early Christian, and us, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." Therefore, because of this change in your life, because of this new relationship with God, because you live in a new community (the church) and because you've been adopted into a new culture (God's kingdom), now you have a new way of life. You are light in the Lord, now "walk as children of light."

The rock band U2 started as a Christian group in Ireland. But the church didn't appreciate their music. So they went a different way. But their spiritual foundation and seeking remain. Bono, the lead singer, has this to say about how God changes lives:

Your nature is a hard thing to change; it takes time.... I have heard of people who have life-changing, miraculous turnarounds, people set free from addiction after a single prayer, relationships saved where both parties "let go, and let God." But it was not like that for me. For all that "I was lost, I am found," it is probably more accurate to say, "I was really lost. I'm a little less so at the moment." And then a little less and a little less again. That to me is the spiritual life. The slow reworking and rebooting the computer at regular intervals, reading the small print of the service manual. It has slowly rebuilt me in a better image. It has taken years, though, and it is not over yet.

(<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/july/1072108.html>)

I hope we're all in that process of new life.

We're also in a new culture, a new environment. Paul mentions the kingdom of Christ and of God. Jesus is already Lord. The kingdom of God is already present, active, and available. Someday, the work of redemption, the process of new life, will be complete, Jesus will appear again in glory on earth, God's kingdom will be fully realized, and God will truly be king of all.

I recently read a book by E. Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*. Jones wrote it when he was eighty-seven years old. He gathered up what he had preached and taught about the kingdom of God through sixty years of ministry. Jones says the kingdom of God is reality. It's the way the world is meant to work. When we live according to

God's kingdom, we go with the grain of reality. When we live another way, we go against the grain. Jesus is the unchanging person who embodies and defines the unshakable kingdom. When we live Jesus' way, we're in line with reality. Sin and evil aren't natural for humans. We've become so accustomed to sin that we think it's human nature, but it's really against human nature. Walking in the light is what we're created for. It's the way to live.

As we get to know Jesus better, his light begins to fill our lives. He shines on us and in us and through us. As we live in his light, we walk as children of light. Our lives show the fruit of the light. The light of God shining on us produces qualities of life that are like God's life.

When I was in preschool, we had a prism. I can remember taking that prism and going into a room where the sun shone through a window, holding the prism in the sunlight and seeing the rainbow of colors on the floor. That impressed me. It was one of my favorite things we did. I still like rainbows and the little arcs of color that appear when light hits some kind of prism, whether it's a jewel or water or glass. There was a man in a previous church we served who had been a pilot. He described seeing a full-circle rainbow around his plane under certain conditions.

The light of God's grace, of God's life, shines on us and in us and through us. God's life, God's light contains all the colors. When it shines through us, our lives are like prisms that refract the light and display its different colors. Paul gives just a sample of those qualities of God's life that are refracted through us, that show up in our lives. He calls them the fruit of the light and he lists goodness, righteousness, and truth. Let's look at each of those.

A little boy on his way out of worship asked the pastor, "Do you get paid or are you good for nothing?" We're all meant to be good for something. "Good" describes a thing that fulfills its purpose. A thing is good when it does what it's meant to do. Life is good when we live as God means us to live. Again, we're made for goodness, not for sin. Goodness glorifies God by fulfilling God's purpose. Verse 10 says, "Find out what pleases the Lord." Our goal is to please God by being the people he created and called and redeemed and enables us to be. Our efforts don't make us good. The effects of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross make us good. The power

of the Holy Spirit produces goodness in us and makes us able to live life as it's meant to be.

Goodness has to do with character; righteousness has to do with relationship. Righteousness speaks of right relationship with God. Again, this is possible through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We're justified—God puts us right with himself—on the basis of God's grace through our faith. God calls us righteous now in anticipation of declaring us righteous at the final judgment, but God also is making us righteous now.

Righteousness also has to do with relationship with other people. Those who are justified begin to deal justly with others. Those who are right with God begin to treat others rightly and work for reconciliation.

Truth is an aspect of God's light. It describes God's revelation of himself and his will. We see truth most clearly in Jesus, who said, "I am the truth" (John 14:6). God's incarnation in Jesus shows us the truth. What God reveals in the Bible is truth. Truth has to do with reality, how things really are and are meant to be. Truth is defined by God's standard and something is true if it's in line with God's reality and intention. Truth doesn't change to accommodate what we believe. Truth is truth, whatever we think. Truth also deals with relationships as it includes openness and honesty.

Paul goes on to say that as children of light, bearing the fruit of light, we shouldn't participate in the fruitless deeds of darkness. Living in the light and then trying to adopt the lifestyle of those who are still in darkness is inconsistent. He says we shouldn't even talk about the shameful things people do in the darkness. Rather, we should expose them for what they are—empty, fruitless, useless, sterile. While the fruit of the light expresses life, the works of darkness show that they come from the realm of death.

God wants to transform us, to fill us with light and life. In October 1871, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed much of the city of Chicago. Surprisingly, the flames actually started on the far side of the Chicago River. So how did the fire cross the river and reach Chicago?

Part of the explanation is that high winds spread the fire to wooden ships in the river. But there was another factor in the spread of the fire. In those days, the Chicago River was a shallow, sluggish sewer for the entire city. The Union Stock Yards dumped all their animal waste into the river.

People called it "The Stinking River" or "Bubbly Creek." The waste in the river was actually flammable.

All of this mess flowed into Lake Michigan, where there were drinking-water intakes for the city. Waterborne diseases broke out. Every year through the 1880s and 1890s, at least 10,000 people died from cholera and typhoid fever. In 1885, fourteen years after the Great Chicago Fire, nearly 100,000 people died from illnesses carried by the river's putrid waters.

Finally, city engineers took action. First, they dug twenty-eight miles of canal. They set in locks and gates. Then, on January 2, 1900, a worker opened a sluice gate at Lake Michigan, and the entire Great Lakes flowed into the Chicago River, pushing it in a direction it had never flowed. They reversed the flow of the Chicago River. This brought a huge flow of fresh water. Instead of shallow, sluggish, diseased water, making the community sick, the river now brought the city life

(<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/september/4092412.html>).

God's life flowing into us changes our direction, cleanses and purifies, fills us with new life, with new qualities like goodness, righteousness, and truth. Those are examples of the fruit of the light.

Besides a prism, another way to play with light is to use a magnifying glass. Looking through it, we see more detail and see what things are really made of. Using the glass to focus the light, we can shine a bright and burning beam. The light of God's grace, the light of the gospel shining through us shows up those deathly deeds of darkness for what they are. It also can burn away those fruitless and empty things, clearing the way for signs of new life. A laser is an even more focused and powerful light. Lasers can destroy and they can be used in surgery. God's light can cut away sin and evil. It can also heal and restore.

Paul closes by saying that whatever the light exposes becomes visible. And everything that becomes visible becomes a light. This describes the transformation from darkness to light that he mentioned earlier. As he says in Colossians, we've been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's Son as we experience redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is the Light of the world, but as he shines on us and in us and

through us, we also become the light of the world. If you hold glow-in-the-dark material up to a light, it begins to give off a light. If light shines on a mirror, the mirror is filled with light and reflects the light.

With that image in mind, hear the words of this early Christian hymn Paul cites: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Scholars say that this is likely a line from an Easter hymn or possibly a baptismal hymn. It describes the new life we come into and receive when we receive Jesus Christ. There are several hymns or hymn fragments like this in the New Testament. One of my teachers had a mentor named Dale Moody. Moody used to teach his seminary students these hymns in Greek and he'd set them to familiar hymn tunes.

Dale Moody was serving as an interim pastor at a little country church. One Sunday morning he taught this "hymn" to the congregation. A little boy, whose mother was gone and whose father was an alcoholic, was at church that morning and learned this song in Greek. He went home singing it and kept singing it all around the house. His father, just waking up, said, "What are you singing?" The little boy told him it was a song that Dr. Moody had taught them at church that morning. The father asked, "What does it mean?" His boy said, "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!" The word of God spoke to that man and convicted him. That evening he went to church with his little boy. He heard the gospel proclaimed and he responded. He received Christ and was delivered from his alcohol addiction.

Will we hear the word of the Lord and wake up? Will we allow the light of Christ to shine on us and in us and through us? Will we walk as children of God—God who is light?