

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Lent 3 – February 24th, 2008

Ephesians 5:8-14

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live 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. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 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.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

We've all heard it said that “actions speak louder than words.” We've all learned from experience that those (including ourselves!) who wish to bring about change through the “do as I say, not as I do” approach are quickly dismissed as lacking the credibility or moral authority to hand out advice. And chances are that somewhere along the line we've all been critical of or disappointed in someone who, at least in our estimation, does not “practice what they preach.”

On the other hand, those who have perhaps had the biggest positive impact on our lives are individuals we describe as being “genuine.” We take note of those whose actions *do* match up with their words... those whose lives *are* consistent with their counsel... those who *do* practice what they preach. We admire them for their consistency and integrity. We are drawn to them. And they often become our mentors or our models.

Through words of encouragement and warning, the Apostle Paul talks to us about all these things and how they apply to our lives as Christians. He addresses us on how important it is to match our conduct with our confession and to “practice what we preach.” He also speaks on the powerful effect our Christian witness can have before a watching world. Using the imagery of light and darkness, Paul gives us specific directives about:

Theme: Living As Children Of Light

- 1. The motivation,**
- 2. The presentation**
- 3. The impact of such a life**

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light...” Paul originally wrote these words to Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians who were part of the congregation he had started in the city of Ephesus. Spiritually they had come from a heathen, pagan background, which Paul equates with “**darkness.**” This is a good description of what life without Christ is like, and it is a term often used this way in Scripture. Without Christ at one's core, there is only spiritual and emotional **darkness.**

“But now you are light in the Lord.” Through the power of the Holy Spirit working in their hearts through the Gospel message, these Ephesians made a spiritual transformation. They came to know and understand who Jesus Christ is and what He had done for them. And with knowledge came about the same radical change that takes place when we turn on a light switch. Darkness was replaced by light...

Specifically, the darkness of their sin was replaced by the light of forgiveness. The darkness of their despair was replaced by the joy of knowing where they were going when they died. And the darkness of their confused thinking was replaced by the light of understanding that life now had a meaning and purpose. They had never known these things before, because they had never known Jesus Christ before.

But now they did. And with their spiritual transformation came the desire to match the change on the inside with change on the outside. Having been exposed to the light of Christ, they couldn't help but to become – and to want to become – reflectors of that light upon others. In theological terms, *justification* (forgiveness leading to salvation) gave birth to *sanctification* (the desire to live for Christ out of thanks for what He did for us). Paul fans the flame of their growing life of sanctification and encourages it by urging them to now **“live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)...”**

Let's stop here and draw some parallels. You know, all of us here have gone through the same transformation as the Ephesians. We are born in sin and spiritual darkness. But the light of the knowledge of Christ has entered our lives. Through baptism, through faith, we have been given a spiritual make-over. We have moved from darkness to light, with all that this means. And since we have been justified, we wish to express our gratitude to God through our life of sanctification. Like the Ephesians, we also wish to reflect the light of Christ through our lives...

However, when Paul proclaims **“live as children of light,”** it is interesting to note the verb tense he uses. It is an imperative; that is, a command. This indicates some strong urging on Paul's part for Christians to live as light. Why would Christians need urging to do something that seems both natural and logical? Because Paul knew about the stubborn, sinful nature that he and all of us still have, and which militates against living as **“children of light.”** *Paul knew that we need this urging and this encouragement, because right here – living our faith – is oftentimes where personal Christianity breaks down...*

What I mean is this. Is it not true that Christianity and Christian principles are easy to talk about, but often hard to implement? Take forgiveness, for example. It is easy to talk about forgiveness in theoretical terms and make blanket statements about practicing it – until someone has wronged us. Then it's not so easy anymore.

Or priorities. It's easy to talk in theory how God is number one in our lives... but then in reality relegate Him somewhere pretty far down on the list of things we *really* devote our time, talents and treasures toward.

We could do the same exercise for self-control... or patience and tolerance toward others... or putting the best construction on everything... or taking our Christian witness seriously, rather than looking for ways to blend into the woodwork lest we be considered different.

Looking at from this angle, I think we understand why we need Paul's encouragement to **“live as children of light.”** He follows up with another piece of strong counsel: **“Find out what pleases the Lord!”** How can we find out what pleases the Lord? No mystery here. The answers are found in His Word. Paul is simply encouraging us to be at home in our Bibles. In Scripture we find not only the motivation to live our lives for Christ, but what it is that God would have us do and be...

Paul continues with the theme “Living as Children of Light”: **“Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the**

disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. That is why it is said, ‘Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”

Once again “**darkness**” is the description of all that is outside the light of God’s Word and will. The only things which such moral darkness can produce are “**fruitless deeds.**” Broken homes, broken lives, broken bodies, broken minds and spirits all can trace their beginnings to living in spiritual darkness as opposed to the spiritual light of God’s Word. The world continues its siren call of living life with no rules or regrets, only to watch lives dashed upon the rocks of lying expectations.

Paul tells us to have nothing to do with the darkness that attempts to live life apart from God’s Word. Paul is telling us not to mess around with sin. He’s warning us not to see how close we can come to the edge of sinful behavior before backing off a step, but to separate ourselves from it. Why? Two reasons come to mind...

First of all, exposing ourselves to sin and temptation can lead us into sin. We think, for example, of Peter. We remember that by allowing himself to get into a compromising situation, he denied his Lord. Elsewhere the Apostle Paul tells us that “***bad company corrupts good character***” and he urges Christians to “***flee temptations***” (as opposed to doing battle with them and possibly losing)...

Secondly, if we expose ourselves to temptations and sin and fall into it, we can do great damage to our witness to the world. Non-Christians as well as fellow Christians know who and what we are. As a result, if we as Christians get drunk... or if Christians cuss a blue streak when things don’t go our way... or if Christians sprinkle their language with vulgarities... or if Christians are proudly sexually promiscuous ... or if Christians gossip or ridicule someone or tell a dirty jokes or have pornographic magazines in their houses... or any other such example you can think of, what have we done? We have brought dishonor to our Lord. And we have minimized, if not destroyed, our effectiveness as witnesses for Jesus Christ.

Because, again, if we simply blend into the crowd and do everything like the world does, what is it that makes us different? How are we distinct? What is it that will attract others to the light of Christ that shines within us if we diminish it with dark habits? What encouragement do we give to our fellow Christians who look to us as allies in the faith and a source of solidarity for their own Christianity if we don’t take ours seriously? All of this is what Paul has in mind when he warns us to “**have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness.**”

Paul tells us rather than to “**give in**” to them, we are to “**expose them.**” Our lives, by contrast, are to expose the wrongness and shallowness of sin, showing it and identifying it for the darkness it really is. The result: As those in the world see how different the conduct of the Christian is from their own, their conscience will be pricked and the superficiality of their lives will be exposed. As the world sees how the Christian finds meaning and purpose in Jesus Christ, it will also see the corresponding meaninglessness and purposelessness without Him...

But don’t expect applause. The usual reaction to a solid Christian testimony (either verbal or non-verbal) is hostility and ridicule toward those who have stirred their conscience. However, this is not always the case, as Paul indicates in the closing verse of our text: “**That is why it is said, ‘Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”**

Paul uses this quotation, which may be part of an early hymn, to move Christians to expose sin for what it is because, at least in some cases, a happy outcome may result. The word is full of people asleep in

a false sense of security while dead in their trespasses and sins. Christians, by our lives and words, can rouse them from that state. The hoped-for result is that the Holy Spirit will work through our witness and His Word, and they, too, will have the light of Christ shining on them and through them... These words of Paul are incentive for our Christian witnessing. There will be results.

So, what have we learned today? Paul has given us directives on **LIVING AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT**. Children of light is what we are, thanks be to God. Presenting ourselves as Children of Light before a watching world is our constant desire – and, at times, struggle. And as Children of Light, having an impact on the lives of others is what we ask God to do through us.