

Living in the Light

In our Scripture reading last Sunday, the image Paul uses is that of putting on the new robe/clothes of Christ's life, which is radically different from this world's outlook and lifestyle. In our passage for today we see that the Christian life is described by the metaphor of light.

Ephesians 5:1-21:

5 ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

³ But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. ⁵ Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be associated with them. ⁸ For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—⁹ for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰ Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; ¹³ but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,
"Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."

¹⁵ Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Nancy and I enjoyed our trips to Sweden and Norway. Even though we were in the lower part of these great Nordic countries, and about a month after the longest day of the year, nevertheless we were stricken by how long were the daylight hours and how short the night. I was amazed, when I awoke about 3:45 one morning to see daylight! Of course, winters there are dominated by darkness, and in the north of Scandinavia, the sun barely appears during the winter months. The "problem" is one of position. Because this region is near the top of the globe, it's tilted away from the sun during the winter and toward the sun in the summer. (In fact, I don't like it that our days in Wisconsin are already getting a bit shorter and will do so till we reach the Winter Solstice).

In Scripture, light and darkness are important images. Darkness is used to describe ignorance, unbelief, evil, and death, the absence of knowledge, faith, goodness, and life. Light, by contrast, is the gift and activity of God. In the Bible's first chapter, light is the first element God created. In Scripture, light expresses God's activity, power, illumination and glory. The light of God symbolizes his gift of wisdom, understanding, and truth.

Jesus is the true light (John 1:9), the light of the world (John 8:12), the way to God and the truth of God (John 14:6). Light is also expressive of God's holiness, beauty, brilliance, and glory. As followers of Christ we're called to reflect his light because we've received a share of his holiness and glory. Our New Testament Scriptures tell us we're to live as children of light in order to please the Lord. God is light and he's called us to be children of the light. The only way we can please him is to live as children of the light.

Paul tells us to take a good look at the dark side of life (1-7). We need to check ourselves to make certain we have not gotten used to the darkness so much that our eyes are adjusted to the dark rather than to the light. These verses, Paul implies, described the Ephesians' former way of life. Earlier in the letter, Paul wrote, "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts" (4:17-19, NIV). We are often accustomed to the dark

Colorful preacher Vance Havner tells about the time a friend took him to a restaurant "where they must have loved darkness rather than light. I stumbled," Havner says, "into the dimly-lit cavern, fumbled for a chair, and mumbled that I needed a flashlight in order to read the menu. When the food finally came I ate it by faith and not by sight. Gradually, however, I began to make out objects a little more clearly. "My host said, 'Funny, isn't it, how we get used to the dark?' 'Thank you,' I replied, 'You have given me a new sermon subject.'"

You can relate to this, how going from light into a darkened room we even have to feel around on the wall to find the light switch. And if the power goes out in our house, at first all is darkness. Then eventually our eyes adjust and we can at least see well enough to find a flashlight and light some candles in the house. And in society and also in our lives we have gotten used to the dark. No longer do we realize the difference we, the children of light, are to be from the world.

There's to be a great cultural difference among believers and non-believers. We are to be God's light in a dark world. Verse five strongly implies that if there is no distinction from the dark, we have serious reason to question the validity of our relationship with God. Immorality, impurity and greed, Paul writes, are indicative of idolatry, that another than the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is being worshiped. Assurance is not the same as presumption.

We're not to partner with the dark world, nor are we to be hermetically sealed off from the world as spiritual and social hermits. We're called to be witnesses in our world. In his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus asked the Father to protect us from the world, but not to take us out of the world (John 17:15). Paul writes to the Corinthians that there is a distinction between our condoning the practice of immorality by a fellow believer, who in fact needs church discipline, and bearing witness among the immoral unbeliever with whom we must associate. (1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

In a river deep inside Mammoth Cave in Kentucky are fish without eyes, blinded by the darkness in which they have swum for eons. Those in spiritual darkness have never been exposed to the light of God's truth. So we are not to be surprised by the spiritual darkness of the world around us. We're rather to pity those who are unable to see moral and spiritual truth. When we observe flagrant immorality on display before us, and on the media, our response should be pity and sadness as much as anger. And God has placed us among them in order that we might witness to the light which they so desperately need.

Neil Anderson says this eighth verse "describes the essential change of nature which occurs at salvation: 'You were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light.' It doesn't say you were *in* darkness," notes Anderson, "It says you *were* darkness. Darkness was your nature, your very essence, as an unbeliever. Nor does it say you are now *in* the light; it says you *are* light. God changed your basic nature from darkness to light. The issue in this passage is not improving your nature. Your new nature is already determined. The issue is learning to walk in harmony with your new nature. How do you do that? By learning to walk by faith and walk in the Spirit...."

We are to live in harmony with our new nature. As Anderson says, we are not on a performance basis with God, trying to act like him. But we are rather in a relationship with him, and are to let him live his life through us. We have been made light, by his grace. Now we are to hate the darkness.

Early in our marriage, Nancy and I attended a Baptist convention in Miami, Florida. My father, whose secretary always had reserved good hotels, missed it this time. We arrived late and exhausted, and after checking into this hotel, which was obviously being renovated, fell into bed and went fast asleep. Not until morning, when the sun rose and shone through dirty curtains, did we realize we were sleeping in dirty linens, and staying in a dirty room. We didn't remain there, once the dirtiness was brought to light.

We are children of the light. We now want to do what pleases the Lord, which is to bear the fruit of goodness, righteousness, and truth (verse 9). Our lives are now taking on the likeness of Christ himself. We leave behind the old way of life, even to the point of exposing the deeds of those who live in darkness (11). Our lives are a silent rebuke, but also a powerful and positive witness. The Spirit of Jesus shines through our life and witness to bring the lost to the light.

Living in the light means that we will allow the light of God's Spirit to expose what's wrong in our own lives first of all. We still have this old sin nature, which we'll carry with us to the grave. And we need often to pray...

“Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23-24).

Our leaving the darkness means that you and I must hate and leave behind the sin in our own lives. We must also leave behind the painful memories and the “imagined” guilt that Satan tries to heap upon us, to rob us of our joy and peace. We must allow the Holy Spirit to expose the darkness in our own lives. Then we can and will expose the darkness in the lives of others. Our lives will be a silent and gentle corrective to those who see and know us.

Paul contrasts being under the influence of wine—resulting in debauchery, i.e., destructive behavior—with being filled with the Spirit, who enables us to live under God's control (18). Both excessive wine and the Spirit have this in common: both can control behavior. To be under the influence of alcohol often results in destruction. To be under the influence of the Spirit results in joy and peace.

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who prior to his becoming a pastor was a medical doctor, who said that were possible to put the Spirit into the text-book of pharmacology, “I would put Him under the stimulants, for that is truly where He belongs. He really does stimulate. He does not merely appear to do so, as alcohol does, and, thereby fools and deludes us. The Holy Spirit is an active, positive, real stimulus.” Lloyd-Jones elaborates to say the Holy Spirit stimulates our minds, hearts, will, and our joy.

Our text describes those who live in the light of Christ as those who actively engage in dispelling the spiritual darkness. *To dispel* is “to drive, beat; to drive away by or as if by scattering. *Dissipate*.” Our dispelling the darkness requires our being engaged together in the fellowship and worship of the church. As Spirit-filled believers, we are to be engaged with fellow believers in this joyful fellowship called the church.

“Your neighborhood tavern is the friendliest place in town!” is the slogan for *National Tavern Month*. Warren Wiersbe said he decided to test the veracity of that claim, and decided to watch the newspapers for several weeks, and cut out items that related to taverns. “And all of them,” says Wiersbe, “were connected with brawls and murders. The friendliest place in town! But this headline reminded me,” he says, “that the people who drink together often experience a sympathy and conviviality. This fact is no argument for alcohol,” says Wiersbe, “but it does illustrate a point: Christians who are filled with the Holy Spirit enjoy being together and experience a sense of joyful oneness in the Lord. They do not need the false stimulants of the world. They have the Spirit of God—and He is all they need.”

The Holy Spirit creates joy, and inward singing and outward encouragement, and praise-filled worship and singing (verse 19) express that joy. Spirit-filled worship has a key role to play in our task of dispelling the darkness. Also, Spirit-filled believers are thankful people and are not grumblers and critical, negative complainers. There is also much-needed humility and loving, mutual submission among the Spirit-filled people of God (21). Our Scripture speaks about the need for you and me to be light for the Lord right where we live.

I still recall a vivid experience in my childhood. I was on a vacation trip with my family in Chicago, USA. We attended a gospel music concert featuring a well-known African American singer, Mahalia Jackson. What I remember most was the ushers in Soldiers' Field Stadium passing a little book of two or three matches to everyone in the crowd of some 50,000 people. The gospel singer gave us instructions on what to do at the conclusion of her rousing song about letting our "little light shine." On cue, the stadium lights were turned off and we were sitting in total darkness. But we knew what to do. We each one struck and lit our individual matches, and all of a sudden that mammoth stadium was a burst and awash with light.

Individually and separately our lives and witness may not seem significant, but we all have a unique witness to bear. And also, when we are joined together, our lights have a powerful witness and our prayers have great effect in dispelling the darkness around us.