



## WALKING AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT WHILE EXPOSING THE DEEDS OF DARKNESS EPHESIANS 5:7-14

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I often wonder if we who are Christians take seriously the Bible's numerous exhortations to live *a life decidedly different from the non-Christian world*. It's not easy being different. The pressure to conform to the lifestyles of unregenerate people is intense. To set ourselves apart and conduct ourselves in ways that often provoke non-Christians to ridicule us or perhaps separate from us or perhaps ignore us altogether is a daunting task. No one enjoys rejection or ridicule. And the temptation to fall in line with the way unbelievers live and think often feels overwhelming and irresistible.

This happens in numerous ways. When the conversation among colleagues or neighbors takes on a salacious tone with all manner of sexual innuendo, the pressure to remain silent is powerful. One need not say anything. Silence when others are laughing and mocking is oftentimes enough to provoke them. When the invitation to attend an event or movie that you know is wicked, it is hard to say No, and then to give the reason for your decision.

Things haven't changed in the past 2,000 years. The apostle Paul knew all too well the consequences of believing and living in ways that go against the grain of society. To refuse to be swept up in the tidal wave of licentiousness and self-indulgent immorality comes at a high price. This is true for all of us, regardless of our age, but it is especially tempting for young people. After all, their number one goal in life is "to save face," no matter how much it may cost them in terms of their relationship with God.

I probably shouldn't say that it is "especially" tempting for young people. We who are older face the same challenge every day. We want to be accepted by the world around us. We want to avoid being mocked for living a life that operates on the basis of an entirely different moral standard. **All people, regardless of their age, are motivated by the desire to "save face."** And if we have to compromise on our convictions and ignore and disobey the teachings of Scripture to do so, we often find some way of justifying our disobedience.

So, why do you think Paul believed it was important to include this exhortation? Some might respond by saying it wasn't important, that the Ephesian Christians were immune to the temptation to imitate their pagan neighbors. However, I don't think any Christian, first century or twenty-first, is immune to the pressure to conform to the unethical behavior of those around us. We are confronted every day with the allure of fitting in and being accepted by the non-Christian world. And it takes the power of the Holy Spirit and the truth of God's Word in Scripture to empower us to remain faithful to the calling of Jesus Christ.

### *Two Reasons for Christian Non-Conformity (vv. 7-8)*

As I said, the apostle Paul was keenly aware of the allure of blending in with those around us. He knew that *with conformity comes safety*, and that living consistently as a Christian was to invite scorn and rejection from the people around us. That is why he says what he does in Ephesians 5:7 – "Therefore do not become partners with them." Who are the **"them"** that Paul has in mind? It is the people that he has just described in vv. 3-6 who indulge in sexual immorality and impurity and covetousness and filthiness and foolish talk and crude joking and idolatry. And why should we not "become partners with them"? Because, as Paul said in vv. 5-6, such people have "no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (v. 5). Worse still, he tells us in v. 6 that "the wrath of God comes upon" people who live in this way. That is the first and most frightening consequence of living like the "sons of disobedience" (v. 6).

Unfortunately, some translations render v. 7 as, "do not associate with them," as if Paul is prohibiting all contact with unbelievers. You may recall from 1 Corinthians 5:9-10 Paul's instruction on our interaction with non-Christians – "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world." He goes on to say that he's talking about people who profess to be Christians. Do not associate with **them**. After all, if Paul were talking about unbelievers in general, we would never be able to share the gospel with them. **Paul is referring to partnering with unbelievers in their sin.**

The word translated "partners" was used earlier in Ephesians 3:6 to describe the participation that Gentile believers have with Jewish believers in the promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus. It is a word that speaks of close, even intimate union or solidarity of all believers with one another in sharing the blessings of the gospel.

But here in Ephesians 5:7 he uses the word to describe what we must avoid. We should never enter into such a close relationship with unbelievers that we find ourselves living as they live. He isn't saying don't ever hang out with unbelievers. He isn't saying that we should never be friends with them. He isn't saying we should shun them and refuse to be seen in public in their company. His point is that ***we must be diligent not to adopt their lifestyle of immorality and idolatry.***

At some time in your life, you will invariably come across people, both professing Christians and non-Christians who will try to convince you that the sins Paul has mentioned in Ephesians are minor infractions and have no bearing on your relationship with God. This is why we must keep in the forefront of our thinking the exhortation in v. 6 – ***“Let no one deceive you with empty words.”*** He undoubtedly has in mind people who will do their very best to minimize the sins Paul has been denouncing, insisting that it's only the legalistic person or the religious person who has a problem with certain types of behavior. So, let me echo Paul's warning: Let no one, not a friend, not a family member, or anyone else in society deceive you into thinking that your ethical decisions and chosen lifestyle are of no importance.

Let's consider how this appeal from Paul might play out in our world today. I suggest that it means:

- We labor to speak the truth, as over against a society that traffics in lies.
- We labor to forgive those who have sinned against us rather than seeking revenge.
- We put a high value on life rather than endorse the killing of babies in the womb.
- We strive to live in sexual fidelity to our spouses rather than celebrate the act of adultery.
- We bless our enemies and pray for them rather than vilify and denounce them.
- We renounce a vindictive attitude toward those who sin against us or differ with us on some peripheral issue.
- We choose to do what is right, even if it costs us much, rather than approach life in a pragmatic way that leads a person to compromise what is right and good in order to get ahead.
- We do not live for money, but for God alone.
- We aim to be humble, rather than promote and praise pride.
- We seek to live by the principles of God's Word, rather than by whatever impulses may drive us.
- We strive to promote marriage as between one man and one woman, rather than endorse whatever living arrangement people may choose to follow.
- We stand firmly on what Scripture says about gender, that God created male and female, and only male and female, rather than claim that changing one's gender is even possible.
- To use the words of Paul here in v. 9, we seek to live in accordance with what is good, righteous, and true, rather than in accordance with what is bad, unrighteous, and false.

Why Paul? Why are you so adamant about this? Why should it matter if I live like my unbelieving friends live? His first answer to this question is given in vv. 5-6. It is because people who live an unrepentant life of immorality and idolatry and covetousness will suffer the wrath of God and the loss of any inheritance in the kingdom of God.

But there is yet a second reason why we should resist the temptation to join with unbelievers in their godless lifestyle. Paul states it clearly in v. 8. It is because (“for,” v. 8a) of ***our new identity in Christ***. If unbelievers justify their immorality and idolatry by saying, “Well, that’s just who I am,” believing men and women can justify their holiness and obedience by saying, “Well, that just who I am.” And what are believers? What is the common identity among those who know and trust Jesus? We “at one time were darkness” (v. 8), which is to say we at one time, before we came to know Jesus, were “darkness” (v. 8). But now, we are “light in the Lord.”

My guess is that some of you have grown tired and frustrated by the constant refrain that you should come to terms with your identity. You've heard it so many times, from this platform, from personal friends, from counselors, and who knows who else. But there is a reason for that. ***Understanding, embracing, believing and living in accordance with who God says you are is one of the most basic and fundamental necessities in the Christian life.***

I've often told the story of Augustine who died in the year 430. Most acknowledge that he is the most influential theologian in the history of Christianity. Both Protestants and Catholics share the same opinion of him. Beginning when he was 17 years old, he took to himself a mistress with whom he shared a sexually immoral relationship for the next 15 years. She bore him a son named Adeodatus, which means “gift of God.”

By God's grace, and largely through the unending prayers of Monica, his mother, he came to faith in Jesus and repented of his immoral and idolatrous lifestyle. The story is told that one day he was walking in the city when his former mistress passed by and shouted, "Augustine! Augustine! It is I! It is I!" But Augustine, paying no heed to her, simply said, "**Yes, but it is not I!**"

What led him to say this? What gave him the strength to break off his sexual relationship with her? It was the simple reality that he was no longer the same man who had lived with her all those years. His identity had changed. His physical appearance was the same. His name was the same. His intellectual brilliance was the same. But his sense of personal identity had undergone a massive transformation. He knew that although he still lived in the same body with the same mind and with the same name, he was altogether a different person. He was a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Do you know who you are? Don't answer that question by pulling out your driver's license and showing it to me. That only tells me your name, date of birth, your height and color of your eyes. Who are you really? How do you think of yourself? What terms would you employ to describe your most fundamental and basic sense of personal identity? I hope and pray that it would be, "I am a born-again, justified by faith child of God!" That would be a wonderful answer. But Paul says it in slightly different and more graphic terms. He says in v. 8 that "you are light in the Lord." You and I aren't "light" because of our native intelligence or physical appearance. It is only to the extent that we are "in the Lord." He has shed his light upon us, and through us, and in us. Let this reality sink into your soul.

This is simply another way of saying what Paul said in 4:22-24. There he said we have put off "the old self," our pre-conversion sense of identity and have put on our "new self" which has been created "after the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness."

Note that Paul doesn't say we were "in" darkness, but that we *were* darkness itself! He is describing the core or center of our being before we came to know Jesus. We were by nature "darkness"! Darkness not only refers to what we were but also to the realm in which we lived. Darkness "is an area or domain in which the power, control, and influence of evil is compellingly felt" (Arnold, 328; see 1 Thess. 5:5).

#### *A Christ-exalting Lifestyle (vv. 9-10)*

So what does Paul conclude from this? Simply that we should be diligent to live a life that reflects our new identity as light in the Lord. He says it clearly in the second half of v. 8 – "**walk as children of light.**" Our identity has changed, and because of this so should our lifestyle. Paul is simply asking us to live consistently with who we are.

What should that lifestyle look like? Paul could have described it in any number of ways, but he chooses the terms "good," "right," and "true." Please observe that these virtues are the "fruit" of light, they are the result of becoming a Christian, not prerequisites for finding acceptance with God.

People often wonder how they might determine if any particular book, movie, podcast, sporting event, social gathering, or group of individuals are appropriate for the Christian. There is no better place to answer that question than here in v. 9. Paul provides three criteria: is it "good" and "right" and "true"? Instead of asking, "What's wrong with this event" or "What's wrong if I watch this movie", ask, "Is it good? Is it right? Is it true?"

You may recall Hebrews 12:1 where we are exhorted to "run with endurance the race that is set before us." So, instead of asking, "What's wrong with this activity," ask, "Will it help me run?" Will it contribute positively to my growth in Christ? When you ask the right question and impose the right filter of evaluation you will see more clearly what God desires of us.

I have yet another question for you to consider. Why do you think Paul is so adamant about embracing and living consistently with our identity in Christ? Could it be due to the fact that he knew where Satan was most likely to attack us? I think so. He's preparing us in advance for what he will say in Ephesians 6:10ff. There he will speak of "**the flaming darts of the evil one**" (v. 16). Those random and unexpected incursions into our lives and into our thought processes that say to us, "You're too ugly; you're too old; you're too young; you're too sinful; you're far too overweight; you're an embarrassment to the church; you're too late, God has given up on you," and so on, are the "flaming darts" of Satan. He knows, and Paul knows, that there is no more effective way to tear you down and discourage you than to undermine your identity in Jesus.

An additional characteristic of our new approach to living as a Christian is that we are to “try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (v. 9). If Paul here had in mind the revelation of God in Scripture, he could easily have said so. He could have directed our attention to all that he has written in Ephesians or in other epistles that he wrote. But that wouldn’t have required discernment. It would only require reading.

Clearly, then, Paul is talking about things in life that please the Lord that are not already found in the written word of God, but are entirely consistent with it. This is similar to what Paul wrote in Romans 12:2. There he encouraged us to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Paul uses the same Greek verb in both texts. It is rendered “discern” in both texts. Again, if all that Paul had in mind is searching in Scripture for a text that applies to your circumstances, there would be no need for discernment or testing. At the same time, the principles in Scripture are there to help us make decisions about how to live in accordance with all that is good, right, and true.

### *Exposing the Deeds of Darkness (vv. 9-14)*

Christians have two additional responsibilities.

*First*, we must be diligent not to participate in the “unfruitful works of darkness” (v. 11). That is clear enough and hardly needs any explanation. Paul addressed it earlier in v. 7 where he said, “do not become partners with them.” But there is a *second* obligation of all Christians. It’s found in the final phrase of v. 11. Instead of taking part in their sinful and immoral lifestyle, “**expose them**” (v. 11).

There are several difficult decisions to be made here. First, the word “them” is not in the original text of Scripture. The word “them,” added by the translators of the ESV, suggests that what is being exposed are the people who commit “works of darkness.” If so, Paul would be telling us to name them, out them, bring their identity into the light. We see something similar in the famous Matthew 18:15 about what to do when someone sins against you. There Jesus said, “if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.” The verb “tell” is the same as we find in Ephesians 5:11 that is translated as “expose.” It means to bring to light, to rebuke or to convict. This would seem to point to the idea of individuals who are confronted about their sin and have it brought into the light.

We have a similar use of the same verb in 1 Timothy 5:20. There Paul addresses what should be done when elders in a local church persist in sin. He says, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”

But Paul may well have in view the exposure of the deeds themselves. Look at v. 12. There he speaks of the shameful “things” that they do in secret. Perhaps both ideas are in Paul’s mind. Instead of partaking in these sinful actions, expose and bring to light both what is done and by whom.

But we have another question to answer. If it is “shameful even to speak of the things” they do, how can you expose them and bring them to conviction for their sins? I don’t think Paul is calling for total silence. After all, how else could we bring to light their sins if we couldn’t even mention what they are? Paul must be saying that such sinful deeds should never be a topic for discussion among Christians. Far less should they be something to joke about.

There are two additional questions that need to be answered. First, is Paul talking about the sinful deeds that *Christians* commit, or is he referring to *non-Christians*? I honestly don’t think it matters. Both are likely in view.

The second question has to do with how we go about exposing or shedding light on these “works of darkness.” Do we bring them to the attention of the church? Do we go on a podcast and challenge the guilty individuals? Or do we simply go to them privately? And what is our responsibility when the people who commit these “works of darkness” are not part of our own church? We may never have even met them.

As I am sure you are aware, there is an entire industry of exposure that most often appears on countless podcasts. When should we expose and when should we remain silent? And if we expose, how do we go about doing so? Here are my suggestions.

(1) If the person is someone you know in your local church, first go to them privately, and if needed, go to the elders. I don’t think Paul is suggesting that you stand up unannounced in a corporate gathering and call out the person and their sins.

(2) Try your best to discern just how “dark” their deeds are. Not all sins are deserving of public exposure. If it is a relatively minor offense, you may want to expose them privately and not in an adversarial manner. It may even be such a minor sin that you should simply pray for them. In other words, the gravity of the sin is of major concern, especially if it is the sort of misconduct that has the potential of harming others.

(3) If you become aware of serious sinful deeds in the broader Christian community, do your best to communicate with the leaders of the local church in question. Let them address the issue. At our former church we had to address this matter. A lady who had divorced her husband without biblical justification left the church and started attending a sister church here in OKC. We felt it was our responsibility to expose her sinful decision to the leaders of the church she was now attending. And we did. But our responsibility ended there. We felt no obligation to announce or expose her sin to the broader Christian community.

(4) Then there is the problem we often face today when a person who is not accountable to a local church and its leadership falls into immorality or idolatry or some practice that is spiritually dangerous to others. This may justify bringing the person to the attention of someone with a public platform. This was especially the case with Shawn Bolz. It seems that everyone who supposedly had authority over him passed the buck to yet another. It took the bravery of Mike Winger to bring the scandal to light, which resulted in Bolz being removed from public ministry.

(5) Note finally that, according to v. 13, it is the light of the Christian witness that exposes the “works of darkness.” And yet, the verb here translated “exposed” is the same verb used in v. 11. Paul has already referred to believers as “children of light” (v. 8), so he likely has that in view here in v. 13. Our words and works and witness as believers serve to expose and bring into the light the things done in secret. In summary, Paul’s words here are “an explanation of how more mature believers in the community can respond to other believers who persist in patterns of sinful behavior” (Arnold, 334).

It’s quite amazing when you think about it. Our lives as Christians are like a spotlight on the darkness of the world. The way we live and talk and act, as well as the way in which we make decisions, all serve as light in the darkness. You may think that it would be better if you just kept your mouth shut when conversation turns dark and depraved. You may think it will be safer for you if you take steps to cover the light of your relationship with Jesus lest people get angry and mock you and ridicule you.

But Paul says something entirely different. Says Paul, “when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible” (v. 13). Unbelievers all too often live oblivious to the moral depravity of their lives. They go through each day hidden and unseen and think that all is well. But when the light of your witness and words shines upon them, “it becomes visible” (v. 13b). Paul’s point seems to be that *the light not only exposes; it also transforms.*

There is one danger in responding to Paul’s exhortation. It is the tendency to become rigidly judgmental and religious in our exposure of the sins of others. This is often driven by a sense of self-righteousness. We elevate ourselves above others and convey the impression that we would never do what they did. My point is that we must approach this issue with a healthy sense of God’s grace in our lives and the realization that there, but for the grace of God, go I.

### *Conclusion*

Paul’s concluding statement is an enigma to many people. Part of the problem is that we don’t know what the origin of his words would be. He says, “therefore, it says.” To what does the “it” refer? There is no OT text that says this, although some think he has in mind several OT verses that contain similar language, such as Isaiah 26:19; 51:17; 52:1; and 60:1. The last of these says: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

Of one thing we may be certain. Here Paul likens the condition of unbelief to being asleep, or worse still, to being dead. So he makes his appeal, “Awake! Arise! And Christ will shine on you.” Conversion is “nothing less than awaking out of sleep, rising from death and being brought out of darkness into the light of Christ” (Stott, 201)

On the other hand, it may well be that his words are directed at Christians who have fallen asleep, as it were, in their relationship with Jesus. They are, in a sense, sleepwalking through their spiritual life. This could also be an appeal to those who have been deceived by the “empty words” of those who argue that how we live simply doesn’t matter, that God’s wrath is a myth designed only to scare people into obedience.

No one can deny that true believers have a tendency at times to put their zeal into neutral, or worse still they put their lives to sleep. They spiritually slumber. They doze off and pay little heed to the way of life that God calls us to live. If so, we should all heed Paul's appeal: "Christian brother or sister, wake up! Arise out of death and enjoy the enlightenment that Christ will happily bring to you."

And what is the meaning of his statement that "*Christ will shine on you*"? I think several things are in view. He certainly has in mind the illumination or enlightenment that Jesus longs to give you so that you might more clearly see and understand the truth of who he is and the glory of all he has done for you. But you can't experience this if you are spiritually asleep.

This "light" that Jesus promises includes the increase of spiritual intimacy with him. James (4:8) says that if we "draw near unto God" that he will "draw near to us." The "light" that is shown upon those who respond to this appeal is the experience of God drawing near to us, opening our eyes to his immeasurable affection for us. This would include the impartation of the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can live in obedience to the Lord. The "light" that Christ shines on us certainly includes the joy and peace and hope that comes to those who love and trust him. It is what Peter described as "joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8).



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