

As we approach Passion week, when we give special attention to the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, I will be preaching from the regular rotation of Bible readings we use called the Revised Common Lectionary. The texts that we read each week have been purposefully arranged to tell the gospel story in a way that draws together related themes from different parts of the Bible – OT, Epistle, History, and the Gospels.

This week, each text relates to the work of God in correcting our vision, in removing the obstacles that keeps us from seeing clearly. In Samuel, God makes the point that while man looks only at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart. In John, Jesus miraculously heals a blind man, and uses that event to highlight the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees.

And in today's sermon, we will look more closely at Ephesians 5, in which Paul leans on the metaphor of Christ as the light of the world, who shines into our sin-darkened lives and enables us to walk as light-children instead of children of darkness. Those in darkness cannot see, and need the light of Christ to shine on them. In summary form, Paul is saying: **walk in the light, and shine the light**. Let the light benefit you, and use the light to benefit others. Let's look deeper into the text to see how this works.

Our passage begins with a reminder that *you were once darkness*. This is important for two reasons: first, before you begin shining light on others, it reminds you that you are not the light-creator, the light-source. In the superhero story that we always tell in our minds, we cast ourselves as the hero. The world needs light, and, well, whaddya know, I'm Light-man! That's the story we want to tell, but Paul reminds us, no, you're not the hero. Look to verse 14: *Christ will shine upon you. Christ is the light. You aren't born as a light-child, you have to be changed, you have to be transformed* yourself before you can help anyone else.

Second, notice that it doesn't say that you were *in* the darkness. That is, a victim of circumstance. In the story that we tell ourselves, if we can't be the hero, at least we aren't one of the bad guys. At worst, we're one of the random people who gets taken hostage, the innocent bystander. But if we think this way, we are still standing in the shadows. Paul is brutally honest: No, you *were* darkness. You lived in it, and you spread it with you. You were a *villain*, not a *victim*. You were a pathetic minion of darkness, and if you forget that truth, you will never be able to bring light to others.

If you forget that you were darkness, and identify yourself with the light, you will lack compassion when you try to expose the darkness. You will run around blinding people with the light and laughing at their squinty, blinking pain. And if you think that you were just *in* the darkness, and not *of* it, then you will fall for it every time someone else in darkness tells you the same thing. "Shine the light *around* me, not *on* me. My problems are society, my genes, my background, anything other than my heart." If you believe that about yourself, you will have a

false compassion for others that will lead you to turn off the light every time someone complains that the light is hurting their eyes.

But remembering that *you were darkness* gives you a clear-eyed view of both *yourself*, attacking your pride by telling you that *Jesus*, not you, is the solution, and a clear-eyed view of the *darkness*, how it is located not in externals, but in the human heart.

So then, remembering this, do two things: *first*, walk as children of light *and* eat the fruit of light. Paul isn't really making a scientific point about photosynthesis, but the metaphor works: fruit grows *in* the light and *through* the light, and light-children eat light-food.

And what is light-food? Verse 9: goodness, righteousness, and truth, which Paul will explain further on to mean singing a lot of Psalms. I'm serious – read further on in Ephesians 5! **The best use of your time as a Christian is singing Psalms.** That means more of you should come to Psalm Sing, and if the lights are really turned on in your life, you should be clamoring for more opportunities to sing with other Christians. After that, Paul lists things like wives submitting to husbands, husbands loving their wives, children obeying parents, servants working hard and honoring masters. When you live this way you are walking in and feeding on the light.

But the *second* thing Paul instructs light-children to do is to *take no part in, don't even have fellowship with* the unfruitful works of darkness. Fruit grows in the light, but darkness is *unfruitful*, so light-children who need light-food to survive cannot be found looking for food in the dark! It doesn't grow there, and whatever fungus and mold does grow in dark places is not fit for light-children to eat. And so instead of going into the dark with a grocery cart, go into the dark with one of those ridiculously bright LED flashlights.

And this challenges our laziness and lack of concern for others, because this is light on mission. One of the tasks of those who speak for God is to use the Word of God to illuminate the darkness, much like Jesus did with the woman at the well. "Go call your husband." Why did Jesus say that? He was shining the light on her sin. We are called as Christians not simply to leave the darkness and relax in the light, but, once our eyes have adjusted, to charge back into the darkness with a light!

Now, Paul is particularly wise in how he puts this, because the thing he forbids first is a pretty common tactic: in order to rescue sinners, we jump into their sin: "I was watching that filthy movie with him to understand where he's coming from." "I use that rough language because that's what communicates to him." "I went window-shopping with her, and yes it turned into window-coveting, but that's how I relate to her." "I went to the bar to witness, and got a little drunk, but the guys like me now, and one day I might be able to think about planning to have a conversation about how we could at some point consider talking about Jesus."

[illustration - Arnobius and the pagan gods]

But Paul says that it is shameful even to dirty your lips talking about the things that are done in the dark, and he believes that there is a way to shine a light into the darkness without stumbling around in it first, and that is what he calls us to. Now this statement might be a little confusing: how do we expose sin with mentioning it? “Hey, friend, I wanted to talk to you about that thing. You know, the thing. What you do. You need to stop. It. That.”

But that isn't what Paul means: he has just given us in verses 3-5 a list of wicked things, and so we see that it is not sinful to name sin. But we should learn from the Bible's restraint in talking about sin. There are occasions where the Bible speaks directly and graphically about sin, but usually, there are fig leaves and metaphors, euphemisms that are used to describe sin in a way that attacks sin instead of making it sound good.

What it means is that we need to be careful not to share titillating stories under the excuse that we are attacking sin. This isn't just about sexuality, although that is one of the primary things on Paul's mind. Don't pass on unsubstantiated stories about someone else's sin or heresy or problem of any kind, for any reason, whether you mean them as a warning, or a prayer request, or anything else. Unless it has been confirmed according to biblical standards, don't drag someone's name through the mud. It is shameful to speak of sin in such a way that it becomes gossip. That's *participating* in darkness, not fighting it. Don't *become* darkness while fighting it! Instead, shine a light into the darkness, so that people will be disgusted, not so that they will become interested!

And this is helpful for application: when you expose sin, know your audience. Parents, dads especially, there is much that is sinful and wrong about our world that our children need to be warned about, but remember the difference between sons and daughters, between mature and immature. *You must expose the darkness to your children, but in doing so, don't expose your children to the darkness.* This calls for wisdom, and for working together to get that wisdom from other moms and dads who are doing it well.

Consider this example: One of the ways in which darkness is spreading in our community is through the passing of laws even just this last week that allow people to redefine their gender in defiance of the God-given realities evident in their bodies. The recent law allows for people of one gender to use public restrooms intended for the opposite gender. This is a wicked law, protecting a sinful and deviant practice.

Well, one of my girls is potty training right now. In the midst of all the bathroom instruction we're giving her, how can I expose this unfruitful work of darkness? I'm going to go about this very differently than I would on Facebook, or on Twitter. She will not fully understand or remember this sermon, and she is not up to speed on the state legislature, but she does know, and we will continue to shine this simple light into her mind: men and women do not go to the potty together, because God says no.

She will grow up knowing that, but now the very real possibility exists that reality might not match up with her parent's teaching. She might see a man go into a women's room, and she needs to know that this is not *funny*; it is *dark*, because God says no, even if people who make the rules say yes. Now, we won't be having that particular conversation without it coming up, and I'm not going to scare her with a long explanation of what might happen, but she needs to know now that men and women don't share bathrooms together. Even three year olds can understand that. This is just one example, but parents, we are called to raise our children in the light.

But this brings up a related point: who should expose darkness how? The general answer that light-children should expose darkness by shining the light is true, but we need more than that. This is one place where Matthew 18 helps us understand the principle of starting small, and slowly but inevitably going more public until repentance halts the spread of sin. Begin at home, and work outward from there. Expose your own sin before someone does it for you. Keep personal sins personal, expose public darkness publicly. Don't forget lines of authority: Fathers should take this role for their own families, wives should expect to be the primary person God uses to expose personal sin in their husbands. When the sin disappears, stop the broadcast. Don't expose a sin that was repented of and defeated thirty years ago as if it were a current problem. We were all once darkness, after all.

Here's another aspect: we automatically think of personal sins, but we are called to expose corporate sins as well, sins of our community, of our nation. This is one of the reasons why simply standing and praying in front of the pregnancy clinic is worthwhile, even though the chance to change hearts and minds through conversation is rare. Our mere presence draws attention to the fact that every Tuesday, babies are murdered on West street.

This work of exposing the unfruitful works of darkness is not something for professional light-shiners to do; it is something that all Christians need to do, not necessarily *whenever* they have a voice, but certainly *wherever* they have a voice. Newspapers, Facebook, Twitter, personal conversations, sermons, books – these are all places where people in this congregation have voices. So post a prophetic woe about abortion. Tweet a gospel word about the Christ who saves from homosexuality. Moms, don't just forbid something, explain to your littles why it's sinful, and how Jesus is better anyway. Say something about the materialism and selfishness that is devouring people in Annapolis. This is why Scripture says, awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you: so that you will be encouraged to take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead, become partners with Jesus in shining the light of the gospel into a dark world. Walk, therefore, as children of light.

- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.