

## **Children of Light**

### **Matt.5:14-16    Ephesians 5:8-20**

This section of Ephesians is thought by Biblical scholars to be an early baptismal sermon, or a set of instructions related to baptism that Paul inserted into this letter. It includes a fragment of what is probably an early baptismal song. There is a strong theme of light and darkness in here, and one could imagine new Christians being baptized at an early morning Easter sunrise service, as the day dawns with first light, symbolizing the movement from darkness to light, from death to new life. So as we read and hear this passage, think about it in that light (so to speak). After telling them to let go of past unhelpful habits...

### **Ephesians 5:8-20**

<sup>8</sup>For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— <sup>9</sup>for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. <sup>10</sup>Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup>Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup>For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; <sup>13</sup>but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, <sup>14</sup>for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says (*here is the line from the baptismal song*), "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." <sup>15</sup>Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, <sup>16</sup>making the most of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup>So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup>Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup>as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, <sup>20</sup>giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the word of the Lord.

Back in the day, when I was in Boy Scouts, our troop went on a 3-day winter hiking/camping trip in the cascades. On the second night some of us came up with the bright idea to sneak out of our tents in the middle of the night and go for a little hike through the woods in the fog. A little middle-of-the-night adventure. Without flashlights. In total darkness—no moon, no stars, on a cloudy, foggy night. Did I mention we didn't take flashlights with us? No cell phone flashlights in those days. We were not being good Boy Scouts. We were not following our motto: be prepared. But that was the fun of it. Not being prepared, and doing something spontaneous.

At daylight, when during some free time we tried to retrace our steps from the previous evening, we discovered that we had been skirting the edge of a deep ravine. Our troop leader (Bill Montgomery), a master of cool and calm understatement, who later found out about it, said: "that wasn't a very smart thing to do." And after a little scolding, he asked us, "So, what did you learn from this?" Well, that we could've fallen headlong into a deep ravine, for one...

As mentioned, there is a theme of darkness vs. light in this passage (which is a theme throughout the New Testament, and will be a prominent theme during Advent, starting next week; so, this provides a nice transition to the season of

Advent). When Paul speaks of darkness and light here, he is contrasting different kinds of understanding, and different kinds of wisdom: one of which is apart from God and the other which knows God. This is not the classic good vs. evil, like in Star Wars, where there is the dark side of the force and the good side—where the dark side of the force is pure evil, and the good side is all good. Paul, rather, speaks of those who are ‘darkened in their *understanding*’ (a term he uses earlier in Ephesians) and contrasts that with ‘*understand* what the will of the Lord is.’ Two kinds, or ways, of *understanding*. Darkened in understanding, and understanding the will of the Lord.

It’s a contrast between what is wise and what is foolish, and what results from each. Like Jesus’ little illustration at the end of the Sermon on the Mount about the wise person who built their house upon the rock, and the foolish person who built their house on sand, the result being, one of the houses survived the storms and floods, and one didn’t. That isn’t judgment. Jesus is saying t’s just a matter of what makes sense and leads to a good result, and what doesn’t. And that is what Paul is getting at here. Wisdom vs. foolishness.

Going out in the middle of a dark and foggy night on a camping trip without a flashlight isn’t evil. It’s just dumb. It’s unwise. Foolish.

There is also a contrast in this passage with what is fruitful and what is not fruitful. That's a helpful distinction too. Life in relationship with God is fruitful. Life apart from God isn't fruitful. Like Jesus' little illustration in John 15 about the vine and branches, where branches abiding in the vine bear fruit, those that don't abide, don't bear fruit. Again, that's not a judgment. It's simply a statement from Jesus about what is beneficial, and what isn't. And Paul is saying the same thing here.

I say all of this because I think we read passages like this and reflexively assume that it says, "Be good, or God is going to judge you." That's not what is said, here or anywhere. Passages like this are frequently misinterpreted that way. Paul only gets cranky about God's just judgment when certain people who claim to be religious lead others astray with false teaching, or oppress them with rules that are impossible to keep. Paul speaks frequently about those who deceive others with what he calls "empty words." Windy words that have no substance, but can easily lead people into a false understanding of who God is and what God's will truly is.

I want to focus our attention this morning on Paul's positive affirmations here. I'm always interested in the places in the Scripture where we are told who we are, where we're given a name, and an identity, and a calling. And the

centerpiece around which this whole message revolves is: you are light. You are light. Notice, interestingly, that he doesn't say you *have* the light, or that you *walk* in the light. He says you *are* light. Just like Jesus says in the passage that Jennifer read from Sermon on the Mount: you *are* the light of the world. That's who you are. Jesus doesn't say "you *have* the light" but "you *are* the light."

And what's cool about that is, if this indeed is a set of baptismal instructions, or a sermon for newly baptized Christians, they get this identity pronounced over them from the very beginning of their faith journey. They aren't told: you can be light if you follow these steps, and work your way to earning that status. They are told, you are light, starting now. Not partly, not step one of many steps in an initiation into becoming light. But fully, from this moment on, you are light. That is who you are. Now, here is how to live as light...

And again, it's the same thing Jesus does when he tells his disciples you are the light of the world. That pronouncement comes early in Matthew's gospel, right after he calls his first disciples to follow him. These newly called disciples are the light of the world. He pronounces that identity over them from the very beginning. One would think that Jesus would say this at the end of their three years with him, as a graduation speech: "Now that you have heard all my teaching, observed my healing ministry, and have experienced a new lifestyle of

serving others; now that I am about to be sacrificed, and then raised to new life and ascended to heaven, *now* you are prepared to be the light of the world.” But it doesn’t happen that way.

Jesus knows better. If their time spent with Jesus over the years with him was a curriculum, of sorts, with a final exam during Holy Week to see if they had passed the test and were then qualified and had measured up to some standard of being light of the world, they would all have failed.

So it’s critically important that they understand, right from the start, who they are and what they are called to. This is so important for us, too, because it tells us that *the call to discipleship is not a call to measure up. It is a call to grow into an identity that is pronounced over us.*

That’s one reason why we baptize children; it’s our way of saying to them: you don’t have to earn love or measure up; you are loved already, from the start; you are the light of the world, and from now on we, the church, with your parents, will encourage you to live into that identity and calling.

This is also why, as I’ve mentioned before, that the apostle Paul begins his letters, all of them, by addressing the people of the church he is writing to as “saints.” “To the saints in...(Corinth, Ephesus, Rome, etc).” And he addresses

them as saints throughout the letters too. In addressing them as saints he is not saying “To the people in Ephesus who have it all together and achieved a high level of holy behavior.” In fact, he is telling them in this baptismal message that he understands that the temptation to live in darkness is still crouching at their door, and some of them were probably still living with old habits. And so he encourages them to live into the identity they have as saints and as light. You are light. God has made you that. Now live as children of light!

Again, he doesn't say it's evil to walk in darkness. He says “the *days* are evil,” and suggests that a person has a choice about how to live, in those days. So, he doesn't say that it's evil to walk in darkness. What he says is: it doesn't make sense. To live with secrets or in darkness, Paul says, just doesn't make sense. It doesn't *fit*, is what he literally says, for God's saints, who are people of light. Going out into the woods on a dark foggy night without a flashlight doesn't make sense. Even *with* a flashlight doesn't make sense sometimes!

Again, it's not so much that the sins he tells people not to participate in are so evil & rotten. Mostly, it's that they just don't fit. That type of living doesn't make sense, and... it isn't fruitful.

So, what does it mean to be children of light? To live as children of light? Based solely on the language that Paul uses in our text for this morning, we can say that being children of light means:

For one, that we are grateful people. Throughout Paul's letters he gets in these frequent reminders about gratitude: "Do this, that, and the other thing; and—don't forget—be grateful." Let gratitude replace unedifying talk (to connect this to last week's passage); and, this morning's reminder is to add expressions of gratitude to what you do in corporate worship as you sing all kinds of songs: he names psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs—the original blended worship experience, musically!

Parenthetical note: *Psalms* were their ancient chants—think of Gregorian chant. They took the Psalms of the Old Testament and chanted them. *Hymns* were the traditional songs, very much like what's in our hymnal, more historical in nature, theologically composed and poetically ordered; and *spiritual songs* were contemporary expressions, some of them extemporaneous where people would be moved by the Spirit and start to sing. In this instruction he basically tells them to sing all the kinds of music that is available to them. *With gratitude.*



So here is our reminder to be thankful; to be grateful people in all things—in our individual speech and interactions, and in our life together as a church.

Gratitude is one way to let our light shine.

He also says that children of light are Spirit-filled people. As opposed to alcohol-filled people! He says, “Don’t get drunk with wine... but be filled with the Spirit.” That’s two different kinds of in-spirited-ness! It needs to be said here that Paul is not a teetotaler—because in other places he tells them to drink wine because of its medicinal value, and for the sake of rejoicing. In this morning’s passage he’s talking here about drunkenness as a way of trying to get “inspired” and manufacture certain feelings, rather than being filled with the in-spiration of the Holy Spirit. So instead of being filled with spirits (small s) be filled with The Spirit (capital S).

Also, in that cultural context in the first century he is speaking to people for whom getting drunk with wine was usually associated with pagan temple worship and perhaps some of those pagan practices were carried over into the early church out of habit. The wine gods needed appeasing, and sometimes the people needed to be in an altered state of mind for their temple worship, and this is likely what Paul is addressing here. In a way, he is saying that Christian worship does not require being drunk, or in-spirited in the way that you are accustomed to

from the pagan temple rituals. Christian worship is about rejoicing and thanksgiving, singing, and being Spirit filled.

So, children of light are grateful people, and Spirit-filled people. Finally, children of light are people who do good in the name of Jesus. People who do good in the name of Jesus. People of action in the world, who bless others and work for the benefit others.

God's children, the church, are at our best when we live for others outside the walls or gathering of the church. We're at our best when we act as good news people in our Monday through Saturday lives, where we live and where we work; where we shop and where we go to school; where we travel and where we eat; where we exercise and where we rest and take recreation. If you are light, you are light wherever you go!

After Jesus makes this pronouncement that you are the light of the world, he says, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works..." Light shines through good work, through example. Jesus didn't say, "Let you light shine so that others may hear your good words," but "...see your good works." Like St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." We are called to do good in the world, when and where we can.

And it is in the nature of light to be a positive energy. It is in the nature of light to have a positive effect, everywhere.

Light *illuminates*, whether reading a book or trying to drive a car—by day or by night. Light *reveals color* (E.P.'s translation of Matt.5:14: "you are here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world"). Light also *gives warmth*, light *helps living things grow*. Think of all of those in terms of our witness and action in the world, and the good effect we have because of what we do.

These are all positive influences of light. And the world needs us to be positive, especially these days. The church is a light to the world, not a mirror to the world, reflecting back to it all of its problems. People have enough mirrors in their lives, reflecting back to them their problems, or their brokenness—or the brokenness and problems of the world right now. They need Jesus' followers to be windows through which God's light shines and brings out goodness. The church is a light to the world, not a mirror to the world. One of my favorite mottos is: the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better (or, of the good).

So, our influence is positive. Jesus did not say, "You are the weed to be gone of the world." The world needs the Church, *not as an institution*, but as *persons* who know they are beloved children of God and therefore who know how to love

others well, who know how to bless and how to serve, and bring out the best in others. The world needs us as children of light who do good.

In the early years of the Christian church, as the Roman empire became more corrupt and uncaring toward its citizens, it was the church, the Christians, who cared for the poor, and the sick and the abandoned. When plagues struck the land, the Romans would quarantine the sick people and let them die apart from the healthy population. That was their health care plan: quarantine the sick people! It was the church that took the sick people in and cared for them. Sometimes the sick were nursed back to health, and sometimes they died, and sometimes the Christians died of disease because of their exposure to the plague. Sometimes they were miraculously healed. But whatever happened, God was glorified and non-believers were amazed by what they saw. Because the Christians simply served, and loved, and did good, “making the most of the time” as Paul says.

And in the same way, we are called to let our light shine so others may see our good works and give glory to God. In the end, it’s what we **do** that matters.

So, wake up, sleepers! Let Christ shine on you! You are the light of the world!