

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY in CHRIST
Ephesians 5:7-14

Choose Light, Not Darkness

7 Therefore do not be partners with them. 8 For you were once darkness [= the realm of the unsaved and spiritually ignorant from which the believer has been delivered but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth)10 and find out what pleases the Lord. 11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them 12 For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. 13 But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14 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."
Ephesians 5:7-14

Introduction

Behind *The Lord of the Rings* epic trilogy is *The Silmarillion*, another of Tolkien's works, which explains the formation of Middle Earth and depicts another struggle between good and evil.

In *The Silmarillion*, Iluvator (God) created the world through music. And angel, Melkor, was jealous of this power to create and struck a note of disharmony. Instead of destroying his creation, Iluvator gave his creatures the freedom to make choices between goodness and mercy, between light and darkness.

It is the conflict between the peace-loving Hobbits and ruthless Orcs that resonates with us today. Peter Jackson, director of *The Lord of the Rings*, said, "You sort of get the impression—which can be depressing—that Tolkien's themes really resonate today and that they're probably going to resonate in 50 years and then in 100 years."ⁱ

Yes, the theme of light and darkness resonates with us today and will continue to in the future. It is inbred in our very being. It's no wonder, then, that the biblical writers often depict life as this titanic conflict between light and darkness. From the opening pages of the Bible we see that the first creative act of God was to speak light into existence. "And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the earth," we read in

Genesis 1:2. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.”

Jesus, of course, repeatedly spoke of himself as light. “I am the light of the world” he says in John 8, “and he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”ⁱⁱ

In the Bible, darkness is the realm of the unsaved and the spiritually ignorant from which the believer has been delivered. Just before these verses in Ephesians 4:18 Paul writes describing the unsaved: “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.” But it is also the realm of evil powers. Paul says later in this letter: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this *dark world* and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:18).ⁱⁱⁱ

1. Refuse darkness and its fruitless lifestyle.

It is not surprising, then, that twice in these verses we are told to *refuse darkness and its fruitless lifestyle*. First, in verse 7 Paul says, “Do not be partners with them...” The “them” he is speaking of are those of verses 1-6 who have chosen lust as a lifestyle, rather than love. Their lives are characterized by sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk and course joking. According to verse 6, upon these people the judgment of God will come. So when Paul says, “Don’t be partners with them,” he is saying, “Don’t participate in their sin and don’t participate in their consequent judgment.”

But to be sure we get the point, Paul states the same command a second time in verse 11 – “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness.” Light produces fruit and life, but darkness is *fruitless*, bringing death. This past week I took this plant and placed it in darkness. I put it in a wardrobe in our garage where it was exposed to *no* light for the past five days. It had water, it had nourishment, but no light. You obviously see the result. Death. The darkness of sin is like that, resulting in tragic consequences for our lives. When in darkness, we don’t just produce bad fruit, we eventually produce *no* fruit and that speaks of death.

But why are we to take this command seriously? Paul gives us here the motivation as he does throughout these chapters, constantly reminding us of our identity. Who we are *must* impact what we do and how we live. He writes in verse 8 – “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” Elsewhere, in writing to the Colossian believers, Paul states it like

this: "For he has rescued us from the *dominion of darkness*," Paul writes in Colossians 1:13, "and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."^{iv}

"You were once darkness," Paul writes. We were not merely *in* darkness, but we *were* darkness ourselves. Not only were *we in darkness*, but *darkness was in us*. In the same way, not only are we now in the light, but light is in us.

There seems to be a great difference between the teaching of the New Testament and the popular perception of Christianity prevalent today. Christianity is *not* a mere improvement of our condition, but a deep, radical transformation of character. We have moved from death to life, from darkness to light. This fundamental *change in our character* should result in a consequent *change in our conduct*. And that is why Paul in these chapters is speaking of our "newness" of life, which should be seen by you and me living in the love of God and the light of God, according to the will of God by the power of the Spirit of God.

Testimony: I've asked a good friend and member of my life group, Gregg Bittgood, to share with us his passage from darkness to light.

This is a quote I read and it sounded applicable to the way I was thinking.

It's by Lawrence Richards "To walk in darkness is to be lost in a world of illusion, never able to penetrate to the true meaning of things, and never able to honestly face ourselves."

In the past, I thought I was doing pretty well. I had a loving wife, a couple of dogs and was financially comfortable. See but the catch was, I didn't have any light in my life, any *real* light. My identity was in me, and all that I *thought* I controlled, when things were going good I thought it was all because of me and my choices, so I reaped the harvest and shared with my "friends" at the local watering hole.

When things weren't going the way I wanted... Well, that was someone else's fault... so I'd let them know it was; only problem with that was it wasn't someone else's it was mine.

Well, I continued on this way for a few years, in and out of various jobs. The bosses that I had never saw through the deception and I advanced in pay and position pretty quick because all they new was Gregg the employee, not the person.

The whole double identity thing worked fine until I started to worry about them finding out who I was; a thief, liar and an alcoholic. My shame drove me to drink more which just perpetuated the cycle, from darkness to shadows and back.

When my wife, Shona, passed away I did what I always did, blame others. And that was fine for me because I wasn't on the receiving end... Just another example of how I thought sinning *was* the way to live. I had gotten tired of *trying* to be happy; I knew I couldn't do it by myself.

Through God's wisdom and grace He allowed me to become broken beyond what I can share in this forum but what I do feel comfortable enough to share with this large of a gathering right now is once I had accepted Christ there was an instant change in my reality, the light went on.

Don't get me wrong, I'm flesh with all the fixins' but now my morals have changed to where I care about right from wrong and I find myself thinking about the difference... and how it might change the world.

I was a carnival worker for 5 seasons, please don't mistake me, there are some Christ-like people in the industry, I wasn't one and I've never met one, but I'm sure there are. The point I'm trying to make is 11 months ago I was a much different person, I wasn't sure of anything. Now I am sure that with God's help I can reach out to those who were in my life, people that feel left out and left behind.

Looking back that's how I felt, the way the "dark one" wanted me to feel. However, the light that God has placed in me will not fade or dim.

I'm not allowed to leave the country for legal reasons but tent city on a carnival lot would be a foreign land to most of you. The inhabitants there know me, the "old" me, I was one of them. God has put it on my heart to reach out to them. When a show rolls through town I'll be able to go and talk to them, see how their doing. Who knows, if its God's will there will be a few of them in here this time next year; one of us, brothers and sisters in Christ, co-heirs to the throne.

That's just one way I can think of placing the lamp on top of the table instead of under a basket.

But Paul goes further, encouraging you and me to not only *not participate* in a sinful lifestyle of darkness, but to even rebuke this lifestyle by means of a different kind of life, one lived in the light of God.

2. Choose light and its fruitful lifestyle.

Paul couldn't state it more simply that he does at the end of verse 8 – “Live as children of light.” I love how the NEB translates this verse: “Live like men [those] who are at home in the daylight.” Children show their family resemblance. While traveling recently to my home town in Tennessee, several people remarked just how much I resemble my Dad whom they knew so well. That used to bother me (thinking I wanted to my own identity), but it doesn't any more. At least I've kept my hair (though gray), while he lost most of his!

It's a natural thing for children to show forth the family likeness. Paul says that light characterizes the family of God into which you and I as believers have been born. In that sense, we are *children* of light. And as children of light, we should be “at home” in the light as much as a child feels at home among his own family. The problem, of course, is that some children of God live as though they feel more “at home” in the darkness than in the light. We live in a dark world and are so often subtly influenced by the darkness around us.

It's like when you walk into a dimly lit restaurant. At first you can hardly see. If it weren't for your waiter showing you the table, you might stumble and fall. But after a few minutes, the darkness becomes quite comfortable. It seems to vanish and you can see across the room. Before long, you can see as if you were out on the street in the bright sun. That's being “at home” in the darkness. As believers, we're like that. We live in dimly lit world, where sin is the rule, not the exception. And so we all too easily grow accustomed to the darkness around us.

On the other hand, what does it mean to be “at home” in the light? *First, it's a lifestyle that bears the fruit of goodness, righteousness and truth (verse 9).* Goodness is the predisposition to do what is helpful and beneficial for others. Righteousness includes all that is consistent with God's character. And truth is all that is in accordance with reality as defined by God.

A life lived in goodness, righteousness and truth preaches a powerful message. The story is told of St. Francis of Assisi who said one day to his followers, “Let's go to the nearby village and preach.” Along the way, they met a traveler who greatly burdened by the difficulties of life. Francis was in no hurry and listened carefully to this man. When they finally reached the village, Francis spoke with the shopkeepers and spent time with the farmers and played with the children in the streets. As noon approached, they returned to the monastery. One of Francis' disciples asked, “Brother Francis, you said we were going to preach. The morning is over and no sermon was

given.” To which Francis replied, “But we have been preaching all along the way.” On another occasion Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the Gospel, and if necessary use words.”

You may lead no one to Christ, the light of life, simply by your lifestyle. But apart from you lifestyle, your message will have little impact.

Second, *a life “at home” in the light is a lifestyle that seeks what pleases God rather than what pleases self.* Paul says in verse 10 “Find out (literally: discern through a process of testing) what pleases the Lord.” After all, the light that Paul is talking about in these verses is not *our* light, it is *His* light. It’s like the moon that shines in the night sky because of the reflected light from the sun. Without that reflected light, the moon becomes lost in the darkness of open space. We too shine only to the degree that the Son shines within us. Without that reflected light, we too become lost in the darkness of the world and sin.^v

On the other hand, when a person is at home in the light, he is engaged in a journey to discover what pleases God rather than themselves. And this is a process.

A couple of months ago, I had the joy of marrying Dan and Rebecca. At that moment, they gave their vows to be committed to each other for life. But that didn’t mean that they now love each other perfectly. I think they’ve already discovered that! But they have now entered into a life-long process of *learning what pleases* the other person. Peter says that we are to know our mate (1 Peter 3:7) and Paul says that we are to please our mate (1 Corinthians 7:33-34).

The New Testament compares our relationship with Christ to the marriage relationship we share with our spouse. We too, having entered into this life-long (and eternity long) commitment, are now to find out what pleases the Lord and not ourselves. And this is a life-long process.

But this too is where we struggle as believers. Far too many of us have this idea of the Christian life that it is all about me: my family, my leisure, my house, my possessions, my time, my work, my retirement, my safety and security. And we strive to develop this little safe cocoon to protect us from the world and from radical commitment to the priorities of the Kingdom of light. To “be at home” in the light, then, is to find out what pleases the Lord and to do that.

Thirdly, *to be at home in the light is to lead a lifestyle that “exposes” the darkness.* This is what Paul says in verse 11: “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather *expose* them.” Again, the NEB translates it “show them up for what they are.”

Light dissipates darkness and exposes it for what it is. Light reveals what darkness conceals.

But just what does this mean, to “expose” the deeds of darkness? Are we called to be “moral detectives” or “spiritual spies,” snooping around trying to prophetically unearth dirty deeds committed by others? I don’t think so. Paul goes on to say in verse 12 “For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.” I don’t believe Paul is saying that we should never specifically name certain sins. Paul certainly did this, even in the preceding verses. At times there is the need for this. This is being light by speaking the truth.

When Mary Alice and I returned from Europe to spend a year state-side in 1991, we have some family issues to deal with. One of those issues had to do with a pattern of sexual sin and abuse that had been perpetrated down through the years in our family. Mary Alice as well as several of her sisters had been sexually abused and this generational sin hidden for so long needed to be exposed. It needed to be named for what it was. Remember, light reveals, darkness conceals. And when sin is concealed it has power. But when brought out in the light, it loses that power. That’s what truth does. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Sins in families need to be exposed and brought to the light. Darkness encourages the proliferation of evil. Light encourages the growth of righteousness.

But how we go about “exposing” sin is very important. While I do not believe sin needs to be called what it is (and Paul never hesitates to do just that), I’m distrustful of any one who tends to describe in detail the works of darkness. I’ll never forget attending a large, well-known church in the Chicago area when I was in college. The pastor of this church went into graphic detail one Sunday evening describing the evil of pornography. In fact, he went into such detail that many felt uncomfortable in a mixed audience. It disturbed me at the time, but I didn’t think about it again until a few years later when I heard that this same preacher committed adultery with the church secretary. I believe that it is this kind of graphic detail that Paul is discouraging here.

More positively, we are encouraged to “expose” the deeds of darkness by our own lifestyle of light. The fruit of light, that is goodness, righteousness and truth, will inevitably (by its very contrast) reveal that which darkness conceals.

A few weeks ago we let off our second daughter in the “windy city” of Chicago. I lived there for three years myself back in the early 70’s. During the winter months, salt and sand are often put on the roads to make

driving safer. The downside is that this mucky mixture becomes plastered on the cars. Nobody thinks anything about it. One dirty car looks about the same as another. But if one guy goes out and washes his car, all the other cars are exposed for what they really are. When all the cars stay dirty, no one feels ashamed to have a dirty car. But one clean car makes all the difference in showing just how much dirt and muck has accumulated on the other vehicles. That is what Paul is saying here. Our lifestyle should be like that clean car that sharpens the contrast with all the others.

That's what Peter means when he writes:

For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. 1 Peter 4:3-5

As Peter penned these words, I bet he was thinking of what Jesus himself said on one occasion:

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:14-16

Jesus says that our light must be *conspicuous*—on a hill – displayed in public. But it is also to be *consistent* – to all who are in the house – displayed in private. And there we have the two things that can keep you and me from being effective as light in this world. Either we are not reflecting the light of Christ in our own lifestyle. Or we are reflecting that light, but it's "under a bowl." It's hidden. We have so pulled out of the world that nobody has the chance to see our light. James Kelly once said, "I'd rather light a candle than curse the darkness." But if that candle is hidden it can't illuminate the darkness.

Light is powerful. Light is fast. Einstein said that he could construct the theory of relativity because there is one thing in the world that doesn't change – the speed of light. Light travels at the rate of 186,000 miles per second. That's seven times around the world at the tick of a clock.

The light of Christ in your life is powerful and effective. But it must be conspicuous and it must be consistent. That's why Paul concludes this passage with what is believed to be an early Christian hymn in verse 14:

This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Though many feel that Paul is not citing an Old Testament passage here, I tend to think he is. You can hardly miss the parallel with Isaiah 60:1-2 –

"Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you."^{vi}

The prophet Isaiah is writing here to his own people. The call is not to conversion, but to repentance and revival. And in borrowing this language and adapting it for his own purposes, Paul – under the direction of the Holy Spirit – is saying to you and me as believers: Wake up! Quit living like those in darkness. Let the light of Christ in your life shine consistently! Let the light of Christ in your life shine conspicuously!

COMMUNION: Of course, this passage from darkness to light did not come about for any one of us by simply "turning on a light switch." It is the work of God's Spirit in our hearts and founded squarely upon Christ's death, burial and resurrection. If you are in the light today, it is because of what these elements – the bread and the cup – represent.

As we come to this communion table this morning, I urge you to evaluate your own life. Where are you spiritually asleep? If your light is not shining, it's not Christ's fault. It's your fault. Christ's light shines. It never goes out. And he promises to shine on you.

ⁱ Original source is Terry Mattingly, " 'Rings' Trilogy Goes Beyond Good vs. Evil" and Duane Dudek, "The Two Towers Echoes with Contemporary Parallels," *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* (12-12-02).

ⁱⁱ Cf. John 9:5; 3:16-21; 12:35-36, 46. See also Matthew 5:14-16; 27:45-46; Acts 13:17. Paul then draws on this imagery of the Old Testament and the Gospels as he writes to the Corinthian believers these words:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is

the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

ⁱⁱⁱ Other passages where we find this theme of light and darkness include Acts 13:47; 26:22-23; Romans 13:11-14; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; 6:14-18; 11:13-15; Colossians 1:9-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; 1 Timothy 6:13-16.

^{iv} Cf. Romans 2:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:4,5.

^v Paul has just described the immoral lifestyle as an idolatrous lifestyle. The essence of idolatry is replacing God with a counterfeit god of any kind. And there are plenty of gods out there to choose from. At the heart of idolatry is the desire to please oneself. One fashions a god after his own likeness. The irony is that the very god one *conceives* (whether it be sex, material possessions, status in life, or whatever it may be), then *deceives*, leading you to darkness and death rather than to light and life.

^{vi} Cf. Isaiah 61:1 – *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners; Isaiah 26:19 – But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.* Cf. also Is 52:1-2; 9:2. In fact, it is in Isaiah that the imagery of light versus darkness becomes more prominent than anywhere else in the Old Testament. Compare Isaiah 2:5; 5:20; 8:20; 9:2; 10:17; 42:6-7, 16; 49:6; 50:10; 51:4; 58:8, 10; 59:9; 60:1-3, 19-20; 61:1-2.