

## Ephesians 5:11-14

### Introduction

Last week, Paul introduced the stark, vivid contrast between darkness and light as he continued to address the issue of sexual immorality.

- ✓ Ephesians 5:8-10 — For you were once *darkness*, but now — *light* in the Lord. Walk as children of *light* (for the fruit of the *light* is in all goodness and righteousness and truth), carefully working to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

One of the reasons Christians are so often lacking in victory over sin (the greed and idolatry of self-indulgent sensuality) is because they're living life in a defensive posture. They're hunkered down in a corner somewhere waiting for the next attack to come and hoping they can ward it off. That's a sad and pitiful picture. But how often has it described us? This is a picture of someone who has already compromised with the world – someone who has already *set himself* up for defeat. This is a picture of someone who is not gladly and joyfully spending his life carefully working to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. For Paul, a *defensive* posture of just *waiting* for the next attack and *hoping* you can ward it off puts us ultimately in the first of only two *possible* categories. So he goes on to write:

**I. “And do not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For the things done by them in secret are shameful even to speak [about].”**

See how there are only two categories – *Participating* in the unfruitful works of darkness, or *exposing* the unfruitful works of darkness. Maybe there is a middle ground, but Paul never acknowledges that middle ground because it always and only tends towards “participation.” As Christians, we've not only compromised in terms of specific sins, we've compromised in terms of our preference for neutrality – of our love for the gray areas. We've compromised by living comfortably in “no-man's” land, neither hot nor cold. But anything less than actually, actively *exposing* the unfruitful works of darkness is ultimately to *participate* in them.

So *how do we* expose the works of darkness? Notice first of all that Paul speaks of exposing the *works* of darkness, and not the doers of those works. When we expose the works, the doers of those works will often feel exposed as well. But the point here isn't exposing and rebuking *people*. The point is exposing and laying bare the unfruitful works themselves; showing them up for what they really are – shameful, gross, wicked violations of God's holy law that bring only death and destruction. What we see more and more is that we are called to live in a very “black and white” world in which there are only the children of *light* and the children of *darkness* – in which there is only the fruit of the *light* and the unfruitful works of *darkness*. “Do not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.”

Paul goes on to say: “For the things done by them in secret are shameful even to speak about.” So how do you go about exposing the true nature of things that are shameful even to speak about? Now it becomes more clear that the point isn't attacking the works of darkness with books or sermons on the street corner (though these may have their place). The point is attacking

the works of darkness—exposing them and laying them bare—by the radiant light of our holy living – by our daily walk as children of light, carefully working to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. The point is not hoping this happens as a by-product of our holy living, but working to make this happen as one of the *objects* and *goals* of our holy living. The Christian life is to be one of initiative and positive action. We are to live in such a way *that* the world may see [and be convicted by] our good works (Mat. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12). Paul says that we are to be “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom [we] *shine* as lights in the world.” (Phil. 2:14-15) We don’t shine as lights in the world by accident. We can only shine as lights in the world *on purpose*.

What we desperately need is not only adults, but a generation of young people who long to *expose* the works of darkness by the *radiant light* of their holy living as they *joyfully and carefully work* from day to day to discern *what is pleasing to their Lord*. This is not neutral or even defensive living. This is life on the offensive. And this is the only *true* Christian living. And so we take these principles of discernment (carefully working to discern what is pleasing to the Lord) and exposure (exposing the unfruitful works of darkness) and we *actively and diligently apply* them to our use of words, to our use of music, to our use of social media, to our use of clothes, to our use of money, to our use of TV and movies, to our use of the internet, to our approach to sexuality, our approach to work, to our choices in relationships, and literally to every other aspect of our lives. And none of this is a drudgery – it’s the joy of our lives! We love to walk as children of light (the fruit of the light consisting in all goodness, and righteousness, and truth) because we were once darkness, but *now* — *light* in the Lord. If you’re a Christian, your eyes have been opened to *understand and comprehend*—to *approve* and to *love*—all of *God’s ways* and *His character* and *His laws*. So as Christians, we are naturally built to be always attacking the works of darkness—exposing them and laying them bare—by the radiant light of our holy living – by our daily walk as children of light, carefully working to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

But what’s the point of exposing the unfruitful works of darkness? Is it to shame those who do them? Is it to set ourselves up as “holier than thou”? Nothing could possibly be further from reality. Look what Paul goes on to say!

## **II. “But all things exposed by the light become illumined, for everything that becomes illumined is light.”**

At first, this doesn’t seem to make any sense. And there is a whole lot of disagreement about what it means. There are “difficulties” with every single view, but I believe the one we’re about to see has the least amount of difficulties, and the most support from the text itself (cf. Lincoln; O’Brien; Braune; contra Hoehner). The first key is to see a progression, a movement from one thing, to the next, to the next. So Paul says:

“*Expose [the works of darkness]...  
all things exposed by the light*      *become illumined...  
everything that becomes illumined is light.*”

There seems to be a change, or even a transformation here from *darkness* at the beginning to *light* at the end – from the unfruitful works of darkness at the beginning to the fruit of the light at the end. This reminds us of how Paul has already described our own “change” and “transformation in verse 8: “For you were once darkness, but now — light in the Lord.” So what Paul seems to be saying is that the goal of exposing the unfruitful works of darkness by the radiant light of our holy living is not just to shame those who do them, and certainly not to set ourselves up as “holier than thou,” but rather to bring about the same **transformation** in others that we’ve experienced in our own lives. It’s true that “everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.” (John 3:20)

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 4:3–4 — And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

And yet we know that God *is* in the business of saving souls. He is in the business of working that miracle by which sinners are made willing to come *to* the light and be transformed *by* the light from darkness *into* light. If we didn’t believe that, there wouldn’t be any hope for anyone in all the world. So Jesus can say:

- ✓ Matthew 5:16 — Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works **and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**

And Paul can say in another place:

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 14:23–25 — If, therefore, the whole church comes together and... all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is **convicted (exposed)** by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, **and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.**

The point here isn’t that this *will* always happen in every instance any more than the point in Ephesians is that whenever darkness is exposed, it will always be transformed into light. The point is that the light is a *living, and active, and powerful* thing. So for all those whom God will save (1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15-16; 4:3-4), the light first exposes, and then illumines, and then **transforms** – so that those who were once darkness and engaged in the unfruitful works of darkness *are now light* in the Lord and bring forth the fruit of the light. This is the beautiful goal of the *light that we are* – to have a *transforming influence* on the world around us. This is to be *our goal in carefully discerning* what is pleasing to the Lord, so that by the radiant light of our holy living we might **expose** the unfruitful works of darkness and see the darkness *transformed* into light.

So we see that added to the principles of **discerning** (carefully working to discern what is pleasing to the Lord) and **exposing** (exposing the unfruitful works of darkness), we have the principle of **transforming** (everything that becomes illumined is light). What we desperately need is not only adults, but a generation of young people who joyfully evaluate every single aspect of their lives in light of the transforming effect it will have on the people around them

(and also on themselves). How completely and totally radical and beautiful this would be! But now Paul concludes:

**III. “Therefore it says, ‘Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”**

What wonderful, beautiful, powerful words! Paul is paraphrasing (indirectly if these are the words to a hymn) the first verse of Isaiah chapter 60. But just before this verse—in the last verse of Isaiah 59—Isaiah had written these words:

- ✓ Isaiah 59:21 — “This is my covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from this time forth and forevermore.”

Here was the promise of the Holy Spirit’s coming at Pentecost. Here was the promise of a renewed Israel in the Church – a place where Jewish believers would have their eyes opened to truly know the Lord and walk as the children of light. Oswalt writes: Here is the promise of “deliverance into a life empowered by the Spirit of God in which the light of God is reflected by the people of God. Like a city gleaming in the light of the newly risen sun, they shine with a beauty that is not their own.” And so the next words in Isaiah are these:

- ✓ Isaiah 60:1 — Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

(Ephesians) Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead,  
**(Isaiah) Arise, shine,**  
(Ephesians) and Christ will shine on you.  
**(Isaiah) for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.**

In Isaiah, God calls Israel to “Arise” (wake up from the sleep of death) and “shine”! It’s like when Jesus called Lazarus to come forth from the tomb – His word effected what it commanded. And so also, when God calls the sinner to arise and shine, His miracle working word *effects* what it commands. But with what light is Israel to shine? Not with their own, but with the light of the glory of the LORD that had risen upon them. And now that light of glory has risen upon Jewish believers through the coming of Christ. The Apostle John writes:

- ✓ John 1:14 — And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And then listen to Paul in 2 Corinthians:

- ✓ 2 Corinthians 4:6 — For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.” What we see here is the power of the light to expose, and illuminate, and transform the darkness. We’re reminded that we’ve experienced that power in our own lives – we who once were darkness, but are now light in the Lord. And now, as those who are light in the Lord, we can have a powerful, transforming influence on the darkness that’s all around us in the world. Paul was quoting from Isaiah 60:1, but he never quotes out of context. So we can be sure that he was also thinking of the next two verses with all their emphasis on darkness and light.

- ✓ Isaiah 60:1–3 — Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ***For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.***

The light that has transformed us can *through us* transform the world. The same light that would transform and renew the people of Israel into a new community called the Church where they would truly *know* the Lord—this same light, reflected in them, would have a transforming influence on the world around them. Oswalt says it so beautifully:

“Why do [the nations] come? Because of the Light! ... The brightness of the presence of God in the person of the Savior will be irresistible. However far God’s people may fall short of all that God is, if they will only reflect the light of the incarnation in some part of its power, even kings will want to come to fall at his feet. This prediction has certainly come true a thousandfold in the 2,700 years since Isaiah wrote. The nations have flowed to the light that has shined out of Jerusalem [the heavenly Zion], and they will continue to do so until [Jesus] comes again.”

Here, says Paul, is the fulfillment of Isaiah chapter 60.

## **Conclusion**

And so the question we must ask ourselves is this: Are there any who might find the light of the glory of God reflected in *us* to be “irresistible”? As Christians, has our light *in any way* been dimmed or obscured? Or maybe some of us need to ask if we’re really even “light” at all – or whether we’re still darkness. As Christians, are we compromising by trying to live comfortably in “no-man’s” land, neither hot nor cold? Are we compromising in terms of our preference for neutrality – of our love for the gray areas? But Ephesians says that anything less than actually, *actively exposing* the unfruitful works of darkness is ultimately to *participate* in them. We are called to be utterly counter-cultural, and utterly “irrelevant” in this world because this is the only way to be truly relevant as light shining in the darkness.

“Once again, Paul draws a sharp distinction between the life and behavior of those who are God’s holy people and the surrounding society. The dominant imagery throughout the passage is that of light and darkness; there is no middle ground or shades of grey. The apostle wants his Christian readers to realize that they are to live by values that are diametrically opposed to the standards of their contemporary world... Instead of being corrupted by the surrounding darkness, believers are to exercise their influence on it...

Christ is the light who has summoned the readers to wake up and rise from the dead. He has shone upon them so that they have become light in the Lord. As children of light their lives are [now] to shine as a beacon [in the darkness].” (O’Brien)

The *true* Christian life isn’t just one of defense and avoidance, it’s one of initiative and positive action. We are to live in such a way *that* the world may see [and be convicted by] our good works (Mat. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12). We don’t shine as lights in the world by accident. We can only shine as lights in the world *on purpose*.

What we desperately need today is not only adults, but a generation of young people who long to *expose* the works of darkness by the *radiant light* of their holy living as they *joyfully and carefully work* from day to day to discern *what is pleasing to their Lord*. What we desperately need today is not only adults, but a generation of young people who joyfully evaluate every single aspect of their lives in light of the *transforming effect* it will have on the people around them (and also on themselves). We must take the principles of “*discerning*” and “*exposing*” and “*transforming*” and *actively and diligently apply* them to our use of words, to our use of music, to our use of social media, to our use of clothes, to our use of money, to our use of TV and movies, to our use of the internet, to our approach to sexuality, our approach to work, to our choices in relationships, and literally to every other aspect of our lives.

And none of this is a drudgery – because it’s actually the joy of our lives! We *love* to walk as children of light (the fruit of the light consisting in all goodness, and righteousness, and truth) because we were once darkness, but *now* — *light* in the Lord. How completely and totally radical and beautiful this would be – and *is* – in God’s holy people!

“Therefore it says, ‘Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”