

Title: Walking in the Light
Text: Ephesians 5:1-14
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Date: 30 October 2012

In the 1990's Michael Jordan was a basketball superstar. He was a marketers dream. He featured in perhaps the most famous ad campaign ever, with one of the best known advertising tags of all time. See if you remember this:

Play Michael Jordan Clip

We live in a world of shallow imitation. We elevate pop stars, movie stars and sports stars up onto an idolatrous pedestal. That pedestal is used to sell us stuff – I can be like Mike if and only if I drink Gatorade. Really?!

Complete this sentence for me. Imitation is the sincerest....form of flattery. The origin of this modern proverb dates back to a statement made by the pagan Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who ruled the Roman Empire in during the second century AD. He said this:

You should consider that imitation is the most acceptable part of worship, and that the Gods had much rather mankind should resemble, than flatter them.
(Marcus Aurelius)

Marcus Aurelius was speaking of course not of a God, but the Roman gods. One hundred years before he made this statement, the apostle Paul offered a similar and yet radically different challenge to the church in and around Ephesus. Let's read his challenge together:

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.
(Ephesians 5:1-2)

The word 'imitators' is translated from the Greek word, *mimetas*, which means to mimic or to impersonate – to imitate. Paul is saying, just as children watch and observe and then mimic the actions of their parents, we who are God's children are to observe and copy the actions of God.

How do we observe and then imitate God? We see God in all His glory in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's character and nature is revealed in Jesus and so if we are to imitate God we will imitate Jesus.

Paul makes it even clearer for us. He says that if we are to imitate the life of God we see in Jesus we will live a life of love. What a great and yet terrifying statement! This life of love imitating Jesus is marked by radical sacrifice and forgiveness.

'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.'

When the ancient Israelites burnt their offerings to God in the way they were instructed the smoke that billowed up was said to be a sweet aroma to God. Now, I used to live near an abattoir. When the wind blew in a certain direction I learned that the smell of slaughtered animals and burning hides is anything but a sweet aroma. The sweet aroma that Jesus offered to God the Father was the aroma of loving, sacrificial obedience. If we are imitate God we will imitate Christ and offer the same loving, sacrificial obedience.

This sort of love is dangerous and risky. It is vulnerable and costly. But if we are to imitate God we will love others out of the love we have received from God. CS Lewis speaks about the vulnerability and risk of love:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping your heart intact—you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around with

hobbies and little luxuries, avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safely in the casket of your selfishness. And in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will not change, it will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable and irredeemable. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the dangers of love is hell.
(CS Lewis)

Jean Vanier tells a story of a friend, a businessman, who lives in Paris. The businessman's wife developed Alzheimer's.

The man was an important businessman—his life filled with busyness. But he said that when his wife fell sick, "I just couldn't put her into an institution, so I kept her. I fed her. I bathed her." Vanier went to Paris to visit them, and this businessman who had been very busy all his life said, "I have changed. I have become more human." He told Vanier of a time when in the middle of the night his wife woke him up. She came out of the fog for a moment, and she said, "Darling, I just want to say thank you for all you've doing for me." Then she fell back into the fog. The businessman, this loving husband wept and I wept. Vanier goes on to say this:

Sometimes Christ calls us to love people who cannot love us in return. They live in the fog of mental illness, disabilities, poverty, or spiritual blindness. As we serve them, we may only receive fleeting glimpses of gratitude. But just as Jesus has loved us in the midst of our spiritual confusion, so we continue to love others as they walk through a deep fog.

Last week Melissa preached a powerful message on God's call for us to forgive. The last loving act of Jesus on the cross was to look at his enemies and ask of heaven for their forgiveness. Forgiving our enemy is perhaps the highest example and form of love – love that most closely imitates the love of God. Melissa's message reminded me of a powerful testimony I heard earlier this year. Please watch the screen with me:

Play Forgiveness Video

We imitate God by what we do – loving, forgiving, serving.

And we imitate God by what we no longer do. Paul says this to the Ephesians:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.
(Ephesians 5:3-7)

Paul is saying that to imitate God we will turn from self indulgence to self sacrifice, from lust to love. The language that Paul uses here is very graphic. The language Paul uses has broad meaning that covers every kind of sexual sin, which for Paul was all sexual intercourse outside the marriage covenant.

Paul was asking of the Ephesian churches was for a radical difference in sexual behavior from than that of the surrounding culture. In the Greco-Roman world men were expected to frequent prostitutes – to have sex with women other than their wife. You may remember that in Ephesus, the temple of Artemis dominated the cultural, religious and economic life of the city. Artemis was a fertility goddess and so sexual orgies and temple prostitution was associated with her worship.

Another challenge was also emerging in the church at the same time; the heresy of Gnosticism. The Gnostics promoted a dualism that separated the physical from the spiritual. Put simply, the Gnostics argued that bodily sins could be committed without damage to the soul and with impunity. In other words, it didn't matter what sort of sex you had, who you had it with and how many times you had it. For men who had plenty of opportunity to indulge, this was kind of convenient.

'Let no-one deceive you': Paul says of Gnostic or any other ideology that attempts to water down the gospel call to be holy as God is holy.

Paul says that no immoral, impure or greedy person has any inheritance in the kingdom of God. The greed he speaks of here is unhealthy and sinful sexual appetite – the continual lust for more sexual experiences. Such an appetite, if unchecked, becomes insatiable and controlling – a form of idolatry that replaces worship of God for worship of self. Such an appetite dominates not only what a person does with their bodies, but also the way they think and talk. They not only engage in unhealthy sexual practices, they constantly joke about sex inappropriately and revel in sexual innuendo.

Let me just slow down for a minute and be clear about what Paul is saying and not saying.

Paul is not saying that if you have committed some sexual sin that you have placed yourself outside God's grace. You have not committed the unforgivable sin. As you confess your sin, God is faithful and just and will forgive your sin and offer you a fresh start. This is good news for me, and I hope, for you.

However, Paul is saying this. It is possible for a person to give themselves over so completely to their sexual appetite that in the end sex takes the place of God as the object of our worship. This is a form of idolatry. The first of the Ten Commandments states we are to have no other gods before the Lord God. The bible is clear; idolaters will not inherit the kingdom of God – they will be judged.

Here is the sobering thing. Paul speaks of judgment 80 times in his New Testament writings. Of those eighty references to judgment, 60 are directed at Christian believers. The context of Paul's challenge in these verses seems to suggest this; it is possible even for those who call themselves to Christians to willfully disobey God in such a way that their sinful appetite blinds them to God, and ultimately brings upon them judgment. There is word for this sort of willful disobedience; apostasy. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington defines apostasy this way:

Willful rebellion involving wrenching oneself out of the hold God has on one's life.
(Ben Witherington)

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Let me be clear; when we trust our life to God, he will never let go of us. But it is possible that with our willful, stubborn, ongoing and unrepentant behavior we let go of God – we wrench ourselves out of God’s hands.

Let’s take a breath. Some five year old children were performing a nativity play at school. Before the play started, a young boy was going around the dressing room repeating, "I'm a sheep, what are you?" Each child responded politely. I’m an angel, I’m a wise man, I’m a shepherd and so on. The boy then came to a little girl still struggling inter her costume and repeated the question to her: "I'm a sheep, what are you?"

The little girl replied, "I'm Mary."

Realizing he was face to face with a lead character, he felt he needed to justify his own role and so he puffed out his little chest and said importantly, "It's hard being a sheep, you know."

The little girl thought for a moment and responded equally seriously, "Yes, but it's also hard being a virgin, you know."

In our overly sexualized culture it is hard to be sexually pure.

But Paul says we can and we must. The gospel demands it.

We are called to live in the world, but not of it. We are not called to separate ourselves from our non-believing neighbors, but from non-believing or pre-Christian practices.

Let me get real practical. Here are a couple of things we will do to live with integrity as Christian believers in our culture:

- We will save sexual intimacy for the covenant of marriage. We will not fall for the lie that such a commitment is old-fashioned prudishness, but just good old-fashioned, God-honoring common sense. In the context of marriage we will celebrate sex as one of God’s best and most creative gifts.
- We will switch off the TV, walk out of the movie theatre, close the book or magazine and switch off the computer when it portrays sex in a way that dishonors God. We will not tell a smutty joke and we will politely walk away when one is being told.
- If you are a man and you have a recurring problem with porn, you will seek a brother in Christ through whom you can confess and be held accountable and you will find help for your addiction.
- We will encourage and teach our children and young people to develop a healthy sexuality that honors God and which ultimately blesses them.

Paul uses metaphors of darkness and light to reinforce his argument. Let's read on:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 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 5:8-14)

For Paul and John and other New Testament writers, darkness represents ignorance, error and evil while light represents God's truth and righteousness.

What is immediately striking about this passage is that Paul does not say that the Ephesian believers are in the light, but that they are light. Because they have been joined with Christ they are now clothed with his very character and nature, which is light. Rather than suffering identity theft, they have received an identity gift.

Their identity is found in Christ, who is light, and so they are light.

Paul is challenging them to live and walk in the light - to behave in a way that is consistent with that new identity.

There are effects of light that Paul highlights that will be evident in our life if we are living and walking in the light.

Light Exposes

GK Chesterton said this:

Men do not differ much about what things they will call evil; they differ enormously about what evils they will call excusable.
(G. K. Chesterton.)

Deep in the human heart is the ability to make lots of excuses. We are never more creative than when we excuse behavior we know to be wrong. We are people with lots of excuses, with lots of buts. The light exposes our 'buts'. 'But everyone else is doing it; but why should I miss out on the fun; but no-one is getting hurt; but no-one will know.'

Light exposes the evil that too easily takes up residence in every human heart.

When our dog Corker was a pup he had the unfortunate habit of urinating in Joel's bedroom. There was just something about Joel's room that screamed out to Corker, 'Do a wee!' Every time he went to the toilet in Joel's room we would scrub the carpet, thinking we had got rid of the stain. Then one day Joel was given a toy UV light. When he turned out the lights in his room and turned on the UV light, everywhere we looked, stains reappeared. What we thought we cleaned up was now revealed in all its glory. It was like walking on to a crime scene.

Light exposes that which we would like to keep hidden.

In Christ, we are light and are so called to live in the light. Our behavior should match our identity. The light of God's love shines into the dark corners of our heart bringing to the surface those things that only God can address in our lives.

We think it is easier to run from God than to run to God. But in the end when we run away from God we are just running along a path that ultimately leads to destruction. Author Steve Farrar puts it this way:

Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you're willing to pay.
(Steve Farrar)

By God's grace, light exposes and surfaces the darkness in our hearts so that we can receive the healing, restoring, forgiving and empowering presence of God.

Light Produces

After light exposes, light produces. Paul tells us that as children of light we will produce the fruit of light.

Who is enjoying the fact that mango season is upon us. \$20 for a tray of mangos? You have to love Queensland!

This mango is a miracle of God's creative power. The nutrients of the soil, the water and the light of the sun have combined to produce this magnificent fruit.

In the a similar way, the miraculous power of the light of God's love shines into the lives of his children and transforms them in such a way they now produce fruit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. Our lives ripen under the light of God's love just as mango fruit ripens under the light of the sun.

No sun – no mangoes. No light – no fruit.

Light produces. Light ripens.

Light Awakens

I love living in Queensland – the climate and the beaches. I'm even learning to love Rugby. But one thing I will never get used to is the early mornings. Now I know if we have daylight saving the curtains will fade and cows will stop milking – but seriously no one should be awakened by the rising sun at 4.30 in the morning. I am normally a flora and fauna lover, but there are some birds near our bedroom that I dream of introducing to a shotgun.

Light awakens.

Paul ends this passage with what some scholars believe is a fragment of an early Christian hymn:

“Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”
(Ephesians 5:14)

This is both a challenge and a command. To understand the urgency of Paul's words we need to understand the broad arc of history. NT Wright says we should view biblical history like five acts in a play.

Act 1 is Creation. God created all that is seen and unseen. He set the sun and stars in their place and formed men and women from the dust. He declared all of it to be very good.

Act 2 is what we call the fall. Even though God placed Adam and Eve at the centre of his creation they decided they needed more, that they needed to be like God and so they rebelled, they sinned. And so they were cast out Eden and darkness descended on the earth.

In Acts 3 God immediately launches a rescue plan to save sinful and rebellious humanity. He chooses a man called Abraham and a people called Israel to be a light to the nations. He promises them that one day his rescue plan will culminate in a messiah who will redeem all of God's people.

Act 4 is Jesus, pure and simple. In him light invaded our dark world. God's rescue plan reaches its climax in the life, death and resurrection of his son who died in our place and for our behalf. One died so that all might live.

And Act 5, the final act, is Restoration. Acts 5 is the story of the church and the Holy Spirit poured out on all flesh. Act 5 is God making all things new. Act 5 will culminate one day soon with a new heaven and a new earth – a new Eden new Paradise - and with God’s glory covering the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Here is the amazing privilege we share. We are actors in Act 5 – the final act of God’s story!

So when Paul says to the Ephesians and to us, awake o sleeper he is saying this.

It’s the last scene of the movie, don’t nod off.

It’s the last chapter of the book, don’t close your eyes.

It’s the last act of the play, don’t fall asleep.

It’s the last bend in the road, don’t fall asleep at the wheel.

Wake up! You have a part to play. God has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light so that in these last days with our words and our actions, as we live lives worthy of our calling, we might declare God’s praises and witness to God’s saving grace.

Paul is saying, Ephesians, Newlifers – make the most of the time you and we have for the time is drawing near when Jesus will come again. Ben Witherington puts it beautifully:

Good and evil are in a death struggle until the end. Salvation has already broken into history and is snatching people out of this present darkness.

(Ben Witherington)