

7 Therefore do not associate (be partakers-KJV,NKJV,NIV) with them; 8 for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), 10 and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. 13 But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, 14 for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." ESV Bible

These are the difficult, real-life situations that the apostle Paul addresses in our text. He is answering the question of how we, as children of light, should relate to a morally dark world. He doesn't give us specific directions to follow when we face these difficult situations. But he gives us comprehensive guiding principles. By understanding these principles, each of us can think through how to respond when these situations arise, as surely they will.

Historically, there have been two wrong extremes in how Christians have responded to this difficult issue. Some, in attempting to relate to the lost, have become so much like the world in its attitudes and behavior that there is no appreciable difference between them and worldly people. These folks emphasize Paul's comments about becoming all things to all men. Rightly, they try to minimize differences that are merely cultural. But they often err by playing down certain biblical truths that are offensive to worldly people, such as sin and judgment. In so doing, they compromise the gospel. And, they often dodge biblical standards of morality, becoming like the world in its sinful aspects. In my judgment, the emergent church movement often errs in this regard.

Other Christians have over-emphasized the need to be separate from this evil world by withdrawing from almost all contact with worldly people, worldly activities, and what they think is worldly appearance. One prominent example is the Amish. Not wanting to become assimilated into our godless culture, they withdrew and held to their own ways. Over time, they have become a cultural oddity. They are so distinct from the culture that they have no impact in terms of reaching the lost. Monasticism errs in the same way.

The Lord Jesus plainly stated the biblical balance in His prayer (John 17:15-18): “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.” So we are to be in the world as Jesus was in the world, yet also not to be of the world, even as Jesus was not of the world. The way to keep this fine balance is to be sanctified (set apart) by God’s Word of truth.

In our text, the apostle Paul is dealing with this issue as it concerned a church in a very pagan environment. How do we relate to our godless culture without becoming tainted by it? His answer is:

We are to walk as children of light in this dark world, exposing the deeds of darkness.

The theme of light and darkness is prominent throughout the Bible. Darkness symbolizes Satan’s evil domain and the sinful deeds of those who do not obey God. It also represents the spiritual ignorance of those whose sin has blinded their eyes from the light of God’s truth (Eph. 4:18; 2 Cor. 4:4). Light pictures the knowledge of the truth that comes when God shines into our lives. As Paul wrote (2 Cor. 4:6), “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Light also pictures the holiness of God (1 John 1:5), who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16). So as believers, we are called to walk in the light, just as He Himself is in the light (1 John 1:7), living with every area of our lives exposed to God.

1. We are to walk as children of light in this dark world (5:8-10).

Note two things:

A. To walk as children of light, we must be children of light (5:8a).

Paul does not say that we used to be in the darkness, whereas now we are in the light, although this is true (Col. 1:13; John 8:12; 1 Pet. 2:9; 1 John 1:5-7; 2:9). Rather, he says that we used to be darkness, but now we are light in the Lord. Being children of light implies that this profound change comes from God's power in the new birth. It is an act of His creative power. Just as He at the first created light out of the darkness, so now He has changed us from being darkness itself into being light in the Lord.

Most of us have had the experience of visiting a cave where the guide turned off all of the lights for a few seconds (which always seem like minutes!). You can't even see your hand in front of your face. For a few awful seconds, you realize what it would be like to be totally blind.

Paul says that we formerly were darkness. We were spiritually blind. We not only didn't see God's glory and truth, we didn't have the ability or desire to see such things. We didn't sense our need for the Savior, because we thought we were good enough to go to heaven and we didn't understand the absolute holiness and justice of God. So we lived entirely for ourselves and our own pleasure, avoiding the thought of death and eternity.

But, when God saved us, He opened the eyes of our understanding so that we saw "the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). We saw our true condition as guilty sinners, but we also saw the all sufficiency of Jesus and His death on the cross to cover all our sins. We had a new understanding of God's Word and a new desire to know God and His truth more and more. We now hate the sin that we formerly lived in and we long to be like our Savior, holy in all our ways. We now walk in the light, rather than in darkness, because God has made us light in the Lord.

While some of us (and I am one) can't say exactly when this change took place, you know that it took place, because you know that God changed your heart. "You were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord" (5:8). To walk as children of light, you must be a child of light by God's saving power.

B. Being children of light, we must walk as such in the midst of this dark world

Just because we are children of light does not guarantee that we will live that way. So Paul says, in effect, “Be what you are!” You are light; now, walk that way! He describes it in four ways:

(1) If we walk as children of light, we will be good.

Paul says (5:9), “for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness....” (The KJV has, “the fruit of the Spirit,” but “Light” is more strongly supported.) Goodness is one of God’s attributes, so to be good is to be like God. Applied to us, goodness is a broad term for behavior that benefits others ahead of oneself. A good person is concerned for the well-being of others, both spiritually and in every other way. He walks in daily dependence on the Holy Spirit, since goodness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Since it is fruit, it takes time to develop. But over the years, children of light should be growing in all goodness.

(2) If we walk as children of light, we will be righteous.

This refers to conformity to God’s righteous standards, as set forth in His Word. A righteous person is upright before God and before others. He is just or fair in how he treats others.

(3) If we walk as children of light, we will be people of truth.

In the context, the truth stands in contrast to the life of unbelievers, who are deceived (4:22; 5:6). But we have been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth (4:24). Thus we are to speak the truth in love (4:15, 25). We are to be people of our word, maintaining integrity in all things. We shouldn’t have anything to hide, because we walk in the light. We are people of all truth.

(4) If we walk as children of light, we will learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

Verse 9 is a parenthesis, so verse 10 goes back to verse 8 and summarizes what it means to walk as children of light, namely, that we prove by our experience what is pleasing to the Lord. “Trying to learn” translates a single Greek verb that is translated

“prove” in Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” As our minds are renewed through God’s Word, we prove in our experience what pleases God.

We do not determine what pleases the Lord by our own feelings, which fluctuate, or by what the world or other Christians say or think. We don’t even determine it by our own conscience, in that our conscience may be improperly informed. Rather, we learn what pleases the Lord through growing to understand His Word.

Living to please the Lord is a fundamental difference between the believer and the unbeliever. An unbeliever may be a good man and even be somewhat righteous or upright, at least outwardly. He may be truthful. But, he does it all out of selfish motives, for his own self-respect, or so that others will think highly of him. But, only believers live to please the Savior. We have a new personal relationship with this One who snatched us out of a horrible pit. We now evaluate everything we do by the question, “Does this please the Lord, who loved me and gave Himself for me?”

So, the first requirement for living in this dark world is to be children of light and to walk as children of light, doing everything to please the Lord.

2. As children of light in this dark world, we are to expose the deeds of darkness (5:7, 11-14).

In 5:7, Paul says, “Therefore do not be partakers with them.” Them refers to the sons of disobedience, who are under God’s wrath (5:6). Not being partakers with them is the same thing that Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says

the Lord. “And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me,” says the Lord Almighty.

Then, in Ephesians 5:11-12, Paul adds, “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret.” We should not be interested in hearing gossip about the movie stars’ latest sexual sins. Such talk should repulse us. Instead, Paul says, we should expose such sins. What does he mean?

In the context, he seems to mean that by our lives (primarily) and our words (secondarily) we expose the unfruitful deeds of darkness for what they are: disgraceful sin in God’s holy presence. Jesus used this word (John 3:20) when He said, “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.” He continues (3:21), “But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”

In other words, by the obvious difference in how we live, our lives expose the sin of those that are engaging in the unfruitful deeds of darkness. As Paul says (Eph. 5:13), “But all things become visible when they are exposed [same word] by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light.” That last phrase is difficult, but Paul seems to be arguing that light not only exposes, but also transforms (at least some of the time). J. B. Phillips (The New Testament in Modern English [Geoffrey Bles], p. p. 407) paraphrased it, “It is even possible (after all, it happened with you!) for light to turn the thing it shines upon into light also.”

Our clean lives expose the sin of unbelievers’ lives. As God works in their hearts, it often drives them to get their sins washed at the cross.

Let me set out the balance of how we expose the deeds of darkness this way:

A. We expose the deeds of darkness by our godly lives as we maintain proper separation from the world.

If we're no different in our thinking, attitudes, words, and behavior than those that do not know Christ, we have no message to give them. If you profess to know Christ, but you're not walking in the light, conforming your life to His Word, then please do not let unbelievers know that you claim to be a Christian! If you're comfortable with your sinful lifestyle, you may not be a genuine Christian. But whether you are or not, don't link the holy name of the Lord with your disobedient lifestyle (2 Sam. 12:14).

But, if you're walking in the light, you can no longer join in the lifestyle of unbelievers. As 1 Peter 4:3-5 puts it,

For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excesses of dissipation, and they malign you; but they will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

As you separate yourself from that kind of sinful lifestyle and live to please the Lord with all goodness, righteousness, and truth, your godly life exposes the dirty lives of those around you.

B. We expose the deeds of darkness by our godly lives and words as we maintain proper contact with the world.

Don't go out of the world, or you lose any contact for witness. The Corinthian church was confused about this. They had mistaken Paul's command not to associate with immoral people to mean that they cut off contact with unbelievers. And yet they were welcoming a sinning believer into their fellowship! Paul didn't mean that they should break off contact with the world. Rather, they should cut off contact with any so-called brother who is immoral or sinning (1 Cor. 5:9-11). Here are four guidelines to follow as you seek to maintain proper contact with this dark world:

(1) Be on guard—bad company corrupts good morals!

You should not be best friends with an unbeliever once you have come to Christ. Your

deepest friendships must be with those that share in common a love for Jesus Christ and the things of God. For a believer to enter into a close friendship, business partnership, or marriage with an unbeliever is to violate the clear command that we read earlier (2 Cor. 6:14-18). If you do not distance yourself from your former friendships, those godless friends will pull you back into your old way of life. But what about witness?

(2) Be alert to your purpose—to win the lost to Christ.

Jesus was known as a friend of sinners, but He did not hang out with them to have a good time. He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). He said that He didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). He kept a fine balance that is difficult to imitate: He maintained His holiness and yet He put sinners enough at ease so that they listened to His message.

It is in this sense that we must interpret Ephesians 5:14 (a difficult verse). Most likely it cites an early Christian hymn based on Isaiah 60:1, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Paul cites it as an example of the directives he has just given. It pictures the exposure of an unbeliever to the light with a view to his salvation. He is asleep and dead. God calls him to awake and arise, resulting in the light of Christ shining upon him. It does not imply that dead sinners are able in their own strength to arise from the dead, which would contradict the metaphor. Rather, with the command, God imparts the power to obey, just as when Jesus called out, "Lazarus, come forth!" (John 11:43). Light not only reveals sin; it also dispels the darkness. So we can call on sinners to awake and arise, knowing that God may impart the power to obey, resulting in them becoming children of light, with Christ shining on them.

(3) Be sensitive to show concern for the whole person.

Jesus said (Matt. 5:16), "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." Often, of course, we must tell people the message of the gospel. But that message must be backed up with

genuine concern for the whole person. If someone is hungry, feed him and tell him about Jesus. The fruit of the light consists in goodness, which means, good deeds that show love for people. In that context we are able to give verbal witness to the gospel.

(4) Be bold to identify verbally with Christ when you are pressured to compromise your convictions.

This gets back to how you respond to dirty jokes or to someone who wants you to view pornography. Here's the principle: Be as bold in your witness for Christ as the other person is in his solicitation to evil. If they are bold for Satan, why shouldn't you be just as bold for the Savior? Smile and say firmly, "That offends my Lord," or, "I can't do that." If he presses the matter, say, "I used to love that sort of thing, but now I belong to Jesus Christ and I want to please Him." And share your concern for him that he is under God's judgment, but that Jesus offers him a full and free pardon if he will repent and believe in Christ.

Conclusion

The church growth movement tells us pastors that we should make the church a place where unbelievers feel comfortable. So, we're supposed to avoid subjects like sin, righteous living, and the coming judgment. Instead, we're to focus on how to have a happy family, how to do well in business, how to overcome your addictions, and other upbeat topics. In other words, we're not supposed to expose the unfruitful deeds of darkness, so that we don't offend anyone. Just tell them how much God loves them!

But Jesus said that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to convict (same Greek word as "expose") the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Without that conviction, unbelievers will not see their need and flee to the Savior. Forgiven little, they will love Jesus little. Paul's strategy is better: Walk as a child of light, maintaining proper separation from the world and proper contact with the world. As you do, your godly life and words will expose the deeds of darkness. Some will awake from the dead and Christ will shine on them, as He has on you.