

## Exploring Ephesians 5:8-14

We embarked on an exegetical study of Ephesians 5:1-14 last week.

We identified that the controlling purpose of Ephesians 5:1-14 is for the Ephesians to imitate God as His beloved children. Imitating God as His children, provides the heading for the two sections that follow. The first section was explored last week (Eph 5:1-7) which was living a life of love. The practical outworking of that was refraining from evil in conduct and speech. Today we are exploring the second section (Eph 5:8-14) which is living as children of the light.

*<sup>8</sup> For **you were once darkness**, but **now you are light in the Lord**. Live as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) <sup>10</sup> and find out what pleases the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness but rather expose them. <sup>12</sup> It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. <sup>13</sup> But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. <sup>14</sup> This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’ (NIV)*

*<sup>8</sup> For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So, live as people of light! <sup>9</sup> For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true. <sup>10</sup> Carefully determine what pleases the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Take no part in the worthless deeds of evil and darkness; instead, expose them. <sup>12</sup> It is shameful even to talk about the things that ungodly people do in secret. <sup>13</sup> But their evil intentions will be exposed when the light shines on them, <sup>14</sup> for the light makes everything visible. This is why it is said, “Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light.” (NLT)*

Figure 1. Exegetical Overview of Ephesians 5:8-14

### **Imitate God (vv. 1-2):**

#### **A. By living a life of love (vv. 3-7)**

#### **B. By living as children of the light (vv. 8–14)**

1. Live as children of the light (vv. 8–10)
  - (i) In goodness, righteousness, and truth (v. 9)
  - (ii) Finding out what pleases the Lord (v. 10)
2. Expose deeds of darkness (vv. 11–13)
  - (i) Have nothing to do with deeds of darkness, expose them (v. 11)
  - (ii) Don't talk about the deeds of darkness (v. 12)
  - (iii) Rather expose them with the light of God's precepts (v. 13)
3. Trust that God's light will bring life (v. 14)

## **Ephesians 5:8**

***“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light.” (NIV)***

The term “darkness”:

- has connotations of wickedness and evil
- and connotations of any place the God of light is absent.
- Thus, darkness signifies the realm and power of sin.

In classical usage darkness encompasses death and is used to depict hell or the underworld.

- The Ephesians **are now light**.
- They are **not in light but are light**.
- Light and darkness oppose each other.

- Light and darkness cannot coexist. However, with darkness there is no qualifier as there is with light. People in darkness are on their own or are there by their own doing, but not so with light.
- The prepositional phrase used in this verse indicates that the believer is light in the Lord.
- The source of light is God and Christ. In this context, Christ is identified as the source (vv. 8, 14).

Light... “in the Lord” What is Paul speaking of?

- being in union with the Lord who is light,
- this changes the nature of the believer to being light that enlightens.
- Their very substance shines forth the light of the gospel.
- This light is truth, holiness, integrity, and love.

**This light is the life of Jesus Christ, who declares “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12).**

Paul makes a similar call to the Corinthians:

*<sup>14</sup> Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ... <sup>16</sup> What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. 2 Cor 6:14-16 (NIV)*

Jesus uses similar language:

*God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.” Jn 3:19-21 (NLT)*

Some translations say:

*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light... For example the NKJV*

Paul again repeats the command “to walk” (4:1, 17; 5:2). The imperative is in the present tense to denote a habitual conduct for those who are children of light.

- Several important features typical of Pauline thought shape these verses.
- The once-now schema which Paul often uses is employed to great effect here as well.

<sup>1</sup> As for you, **you were dead in your transgressions and sins**, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient....<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, **God, who is rich in mercy**, <sup>5</sup> **made us alive with Christ** even when we were dead in transgressions ... (Eph 2:1-5 NIV)

<sup>11</sup> Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands) — <sup>12</sup> **remember that at that time you were separate from Christ**, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near** by the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:11-13 NIV)

You **used to walk in these ways**, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have **put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator**. (Col 3:7-10 NIV)

The theme of darkness and light finds its home in the drama of **taking off the former old human and being renewed by putting on the new human**.

This is something we need to choose to do daily. This is the process of sanctification.

<sup>22</sup> You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to **put off your old self**, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; <sup>23</sup> to be **made new in the attitude**

***of your minds;*** <sup>24</sup> ***and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:22-24 NIV)***

- In the context of Ephesians 5:8-10, the old-new theme is combined with one of the starkest contrasts in the Bible—light and darkness.

Ephesians pictures the realm in which believers:

- “walk” as the light.
- they themselves also are light.
- Remembering at the same time, they are light only **in the Lord (5:8)**.

Their relation to the light of God is therefore that of being the offspring of light, the children of light.

In Ephesians, the contrast of light and darkness is an ethical dualism. It draws a line, not so much through the heart of each believer or even through the community of the church, but rather through humanity. The line is between:

- **the sons of disobedience and the beloved children of light**
- **those who are under the sway of the prince of the air (2:2) and those who have been brought from darkness to light (5:14; 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Thess. 5:4-5; 1 Pet. 2:9)**
- between what the children of light once were and what they now are.

This stark contrast is a reminder that something fundamental and radical has taken place in the lives of believers.

- They are no longer what they once were (2:11-22).
- This is an assertion of fact, a change that must now find reality in believers’ lives.

You were once darkness; you now are light. So, live as children of light!

This is like what we see in Galatians 5:25: *“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit”*. Such exhortation assumes the Spirit’s transforming and empowering presence in the lives of believers, who are a part of the new human created by God.

If it is true that believers participate in this new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24), one would expect their “walk” to emerge as natural “fruit” from such a renewed nature.

<sup>17</sup> *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: **The old has gone, the new is here!** (2 Cor 5:17 NIV)*

- Despite the certainty of what is now true of the children of light, the existence of exhortation is witness to something Paul and his students know well: what is already true (now you are light) is yet in need of realization.

That provides us with an understanding of v. 8:

*“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of the light.” (NIV)*

## **Ephesians 5:9**

*“for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth” (NIV)*

The conjunction “for” is explanatory here, elaborating more fully on what it means to walk in the light. It means the “product or outcome of something” or “the natural result of what has been done”.

The ESV, NIV, ASV and NLT all use the phrase “fruit of the light”, whereas the NKJV uses the phrase “fruit of the Spirit”. The former phrase is attested by early and diverse witnesses, and that the latter variant is unlikely original and may have arisen due to familiarity with this term in Galatians 5:22. Interesting to note is that “goodness” is also listed as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control... (Gal 5:22-23 NIV)*

## Goodness

The root word has reference to moral and beneficial good. The word itself means good thing(s), benefit, welfare, goodness; the best translation is “goodness,” which embraces generosity towards others.

## Righteousness

**In the present context this word refers to this quality of life from which righteous actions spring. Therefore, the fruit of light consists not only in goodness with generosity but also righteous actions or works.**

## Truth

This is speaking of reality or what is actual as opposed to that which is false. More concretely for this context, it has the idea of right action or living as opposed to false living. It is a quality that comes from God, and from which springs the actions of truthfulness.

- The “fruit of the light” is given in a general triad, “all goodness and righteousness and truth,” which corresponds in contrast to the three sets of three nouns in each of vv. 3–5.

Remember: Ephesians 5:3-5

*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 person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

- The terms in v. 9 are not pure antonyms of the evils in the previous verses, though both “goodness” and “righteousness” may be seen as the rough opposite of “impurity”, “greed” and “sexual immorality” while the three nouns in v. 4 “obscenity and foolish talk or coarse jesting” might be seen as counteracted by “truth”.

- His point is to provide a quick portrait with very broad strokes on what sort of characteristics define the saints' lives.

## **Ephesians 5:10**

*and find out what pleases the Lord*

Discernment of this type is at the very heart of biblical wisdom as the renewed believer perceives how to please the Lord in the concrete situations of life and thereby to follow the dictates of righteousness, goodness, truth and love in the day to day situations in our lives.

“Pleasing the Lord” is a common biblical way of referring to the sacrificial worship of God.

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Rom 12:1-2 NIV)*

*And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Heb 13:16 NIV)*

Ephesians 5:2 has already mentioned how Christ offered himself up to God as a sacrifice with a pleasing odour. Romans 12:1-2, is particularly relevant where believers are to present themselves as a “living” sacrifice, “pleasing” to God. In Romans 12, such a pleasing sacrifice is nothing other than the transforming practice of nonconformity and how to “discern what is good and pleasing [to God] and perfect”.

Nonconformity and the practice of the good, the just, and the true gives God pleasure (5:9). The exercise of these in our daily lives constitutes worship by the children of light. It is pleasing to the Lord.

And that is the key. How do I take the Word of God and apply it in my everyday life as I walk out of here?

## **Ephesians 5:11**

***“Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness but rather expose them” (NIV)***

*...and **do not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead even expose them.***

**Have nothing to do with:**

**Not being associated in a joint activity; participating in; not to having a joint share in, or a connection with.**

**The conjunction links this prohibition to the one in v. 7. Believers are not to be fellow participants with sinners (v. 7) and are not to participate in their unfruitful works of darkness (v. 11).**

**Fruitless deeds of darkness:**

**Remember, Paul has been talking about the fruit of the light in v. 9.**

Paul combines here the metaphors of “light” and “fruit” and speaks of the “fruitless deeds of darkness”.

Unfruitful works are useless and unproductive and their source in “darkness” corresponds to the darkness in which they once lived (v. 8). If they have been formerly darkness but are now the light in the Lord, why should they participate in the sins that come from the place to which they had previously been in bondage? Such fruitless works are the kind Paul has been outlining above in

- thought,
- word,
- and deed.

In v. 11 he restates the central concern of the passage (5:3–14) expressed in v. 7, that the saints are to put off their former unlawful behavior and to keep from joining their nonbelieving neighbors in sin.

The contrast between fruitless darkness and productive light needs continually to be sharpened: Have nothing to do with, or do not co-participate in the fruitless works of darkness. The word co-participate means that believers are to have no share in a darkness too awful even to talk about. One might expect the community of believers now to turn their back on the darkness and to separate itself. Radical nonconformity is often buttressed with hostility toward those who do not meet the standards of righteousness and truth. Ephesians, however, proposes something better for believers than turning their backs on the darkness and those who sit in it and pushing the works of darkness out of mind (5:12). **Instead, the children of light are to expose evil works.**

### **Expose:**

In speaking of engaging with works of darkness, the ESV, NIV, NKJV and NLT instruct the Ephesians to “expose them” and the ASV, to “reprove them”. The Greek word used here means to expose, reprove, rebuke, correct, or tell. This instruction from Paul has been understood in two ways.

This word “expose” has been understood in two ways:

- i. exposing through direct verbal confrontation,
- ii. through the believer’s Godly lives bringing light, exposing the darkness and transforming it.

Many commentators include both definitions.

If we look at other NT passages, this Greek word for “expose” can be understood to mean “to expose or convict” (Mt 18:15; John 3:20; 8:46; 16:8; 1 Cor 14:24; 2 Tim 4:2; Jas 2:9; Jude 15) and to “reprove or rebuke” (Luke 3:19; 1 Tim 5:20; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:15; Heb 12:5; Rev 3:19).

In the present context, object of the Greek imperative is works as opposed to persons, which is why many translations prefer “expose”.

In the following verse, Paul provides a reason for exposing the works of darkness, they are too shameful to even mention. He concludes his thought with an explanation of what will happen when those works of darkness are exposed:

everything exposed by the light becomes visible, and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.

Although Paul is writing to believers, however, the twist at the end of the pericope (5:13-14) provides a question:

Whose fruitless deeds of darkness are to be exposed?

Those of the sons of disobedience or the sons of God?

It appears that the exposing here is not directed primarily at works of darkness amongst fellow believers, but also those of the sons of disobedience who sit in darkness, because the goal, it seems, is transformation.

A few thoughts on this:

- The overall focus of this passage consists of ethical injunctions to believers; the same verb expose is used by Paul to rebuke errant members of the community in other places in the NT (1 Tim 5:20; 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9, 13; Mt 18:1)
- Believers are thus to not participate with sinners and have nothing to do with their requisite works of darkness, rather exposing them (the unfruitful works).
- The twist at the end of the pericope remains, which means that the phrase could be directed at the deeds of darkness performed by believers as well as non-believers.

The word “expose” has a rich association in terms of being a covenant obligation to love your neighbour. In Matthew 18:15,

*“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Mt 18:15-17NIV)*

Jesus calls on his followers to expose the sin of the brother and sister—a generous if often conflictual act of love meant to bring **repentance and restoration**.

Ephesians 5:13-14 suggests that such an understanding of “expose” is present also in this passage. However, the focus of the exposure is **not on the misdeeds of fellow members of the community, but on the goings on among the sons of disobedience**. Now the act of neighbourly love seen in 4:25

*Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body. (Eph 4:25 NIV)*

is to be extended to the sons of disobedience, whether they heed the confrontation or consider it an act of love. Preaching peace to the far and near

*He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. (Eph 2:17 NIV)*

now finds expression in relation to the **confrontation with a culture of darkness**.

## **Ephesians 5:12**

*It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.*

- Paul does not want to catalog these practices further, or his audience to delve into them, for they are “shameful even to mention,” much less to do.
- So, why expose them?
- Exposing such things not only reveals unfruitful works but
  - i. Deeds of darkness cannot be allowed to spread and encompass the community of believers
  - ii. The goal is transformation, and it is participation in God’s comprehensive project of reclaiming creation and those who inhabit it, including the sons of disobedience who sit in darkness. To expose is to transform.

## **Ephesians 5:13**

*“But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.” (NIV)*

This is a general statement of truth that develops the light-darkness metaphor and explains how it is that the church is equipped by being the embassy of the new creation to enlighten the world through the gospel. Paul provides a reason for exposing the works of darkness that are too shameful to even mention. He provides an explanation of what will happen when those works of darkness are exposed: everything exposed by the light becomes visible, and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.

## **Ephesians 5:14**

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

With an introductory statement reserved or used primarily in the citing of an OT passage. There is a rather baffling presence in verse 14 of what most commentators believe is a hymn fragment. This hymn must have enjoyed wide currency in Pauline circles and have achieved something approaching canonical status. This status is shown by the fact that it is introduced with a formula otherwise reserved for quoting Scripture.

“This is why it is said.”

The hymn referred to was likely sung during baptisms, serving as an evangelistic call for new believers. It echoes Christ’s message of peace to both Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:13, 17), and reminds believers that they themselves are recipients of Christ’s transforming light. With this gratitude, they are called to direct the light of Christ into the surrounding darkness. Paul’s reference to this hymn also recalls the call to salvation, reminding the Ephesians of their own conversion.

Having said that, the phrase *‘Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you’* has been linked to certain OT scriptures as well:

- Isaiah 26:19,
- Isaiah 60:1, and
- Jonah 1:6.

Whether primarily from a hymn or from OT scriptures or a hymn based on OT scriptures, Paul speaks of an awakening from spiritual slumber and abandonment of unfruitful works of darkness, which lead to death. Repentance, according to Paul, will bring God's pleasure and cause Christ's light to shine.

Jewish readers, familiar with the blessings in Numbers 6:24-26 and Isaiah 60:1-4, would recognize the echoes of God's call to His people to arise and shine, reflecting His glory. In this context, "Christ" refers not only to Jesus but also to those who are now part of His body. These believers, who were once drawn to Christ's light, have now become light themselves. As members of Christ's body, they participate in shining that light into the darkness of the world (Mt 5:14, 16; Is 42:6-7).

The meaning is clear: the light shows up things for what they truly are. Everything that is revealed is light. Or it is light that makes everything visible. However, this alone does not capture the surprising twist. Exposing the works of darkness is not primarily directed at the works of darkness still present among fellow Christians (as in 4:25). Here it is participation in God's comprehensive project of reclaiming creation and those who inhabit it, including the sons of disobedience who sit in darkness. To expose is to transform.

This separation of light from darkness serves a larger purpose: reconciliation, restoration, and re-creation through Christ, culminating in the gathering of all things in Him (Eph 1:10). This distinction between light and darkness is essential for the fulfilment of God's redemptive plan.

## **Conclusion**

- Christians are also to imitate God by living as children of the light (Eph 5:8b).
- This is comprised of walking in all that is good, righteous and true, finding out what is pleasing to the Lord (Eph 5:9-10).
- In this regard, Paul gives a prohibition to Christians: to have nothing to do with the deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

- This is interesting. Christians are to abstain from the deeds, live correctly as children of the light and allow their lifestyles to be the light or example illuminating the darkness.
- The exposing also has elements of verbal confrontation. This would be counter-cultural in that it could be viewed as intolerant and unloving in many of our current contexts. Yet, Paul instructs believers concerning this.
- Effectively Paul highlights that merely avoiding the behaviour unbecoming of a Christian does not suffice.
- Christians should daily put on the new man, continuously living out the new identities of beloved children of a loving God and children of light, exposing deeds of darkness.
- In pursuing this, Christians will become transformative agents for the darkness around them.

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