

The Decorum of Light

Ephesians 5:3-20

Some years ago there was a Prodigal Son cartoon in which a father was going down the road to meet his son, but that look of ecstatic joy is missing. The caption read, "I'll be glad when this boy grows up; this is the sixth fatted calf." Does the grace of God come to us with any obligations? When does one become responsible? When a sinner is called out of sin's darkness and into God's light, is there some sense of decorum expected of him?

What is our real responsibility to God? Why are we here? It's easy to get caught up in the world's way of seeing things and judge our success as Christians or as a church by the same measures the world uses to judge the worth and success of things. But, is that what is really means to honor God?

The Bible is actually very clear regarding what Christian success (life in the light) looks like. In our text last week, chapter 4:1-6, Paul began the "So what?" section of Ephesians. Because of God's eternal purpose of showcasing unity to the world through his church, Paul challenged all of us to live lives worthy of our calling in Christ. This means we are to replace the selfishness and boisterousness of the natural man with the humility, gentleness, patience, and loving forbearance of Jesus. We are to work hard to preserve the unity of the Spirit. We don't manufacture oneness. We are already a part of one body infused with the life of God by one Spirit. Our task is simply to not damage God's declared unity.

Paul described this preservation of oneness from several angles. Because of my convoluted approach to this series, I am out of sequence again. I did cover chapter 4:7-16 on June 6 in a message entitled "Building Up the Church." It had to do with building up the Body of Christ and growing into maturity together by ministering with the gifts God has given to His people. I covered chapter 4:17-24 on June 13 in a message entitled "You Are Not Everybody Else." That was a challenge to not live as the rank and file of humanity. Their world view and value system is of no use to us. We must "...put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (verse 24).

Finally, way back on May 9, in a message entitled "Fissures of Men", I covered chapters 4:25-5:2. This text called us to seal the cracks in our fellowship that divide us; things like falsehood, anger, theft, bitterness, and the like. On the contrary, we are to "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (verse 32).

Now we are current. Today's text continues to describe the duties placed on us when God called us out of darkness and into His light. Verse 8 says, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." We might have expected Paul to say, "You used to walk in darkness, but now you walk in light." But, God did not simply turn up a dimmer switch. He changed us. Paul wants us to think in terms not only of obedience, but also of the transformation that God is working in us. We are not the same old sinners. We were estranged from God in our hearts. We were not in darkness. We *were* darkness. Now, we are "new creations." In our individual bodies and in the church, we house the Holy Spirit. This is about more than behaving. This is about reflecting a new nature of light. So, what does living as light look like?

I. The Purity of the Light (3-7)

A. Some Things Simply Do Not Belong in the Light verses 3, 4

³But 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. ⁴Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.

"Sexual immorality" describes all sexual sins. Paul didn't differentiate, which we should bear in mind, for today, we seem to allow ourselves to be only slightly offended by some things while really offended by others. It is all inappropriate for God's people. "Impurity" was a similarly broad term for desires of a non-sexual nature, such as things one might cheat or steal to acquire. "Greed," is the key term, representing a desire to have more of whatever the passion of the moment demands.

Then, keeping a mistress was the rule, not the exception for a Greek man. Homosexuality was rampant. Temples were routinely financed with revenues generated by shrine prostitutes. Purity swept through the world because of Christianity, but it is eroding in our own culture. Modern standards have been lowered. Half of a neighboring state's population thinks that their governor's extra-marital affair is irrelevant to his integrity as a leader, and the fact that it was homosexual fling is a non-issue. California U.S Representative Barbara Lee has said, "An abstinence-until-marriage program is not only irresponsible, it's really inhumane." We may live in a culture much closer to ancient Ephesus than to the America we once knew. Is this a time to relax our standards? On the contrary, it is more pressing than ever that we posture ourselves as a people distinct from the culture.

Paul addresses our speech. "Obscenity" does not need to be defined. "Joking" refers to wittiness. Humor is a gift from God. Jesus taught with wit. Paul's issue was with "coarse joking" which takes wit to the gutter. What he had in mind were double entendres as well as allusions and preoccupations with themes that are crude, not unlike much of media offerings that many Christians consider harmless. "Foolish talk" or "the speech of a fool" does not address the deficiency of a man's intellect so much as his deficiency of moral sensitivity. Foolish talk is "popping off" without acknowledging that God is an audience to everything we say. It is chattering as though God is not present.

Our faith may be steadfast and our doctrine pure, but our speech is the daily proof that we are sensitive to God's holiness. Paul calls us to "thanksgiving." Unwholesome speech is best kept in check when we use the gift of utterance for its highest purpose, to speak the praises of God. A discipline of thankfulness keeps God at the center of life. The flavor of our speech cannot help but to become more spiritual and less silly. I do not mean that our language will be peppered with spiritual clichés. That's phony. I do mean that we will more sensitive to God's presence when we speak.

B. God's Eternal Kingdom Will Be a Kingdom of Light verses 5-7

⁵For 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. ⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷Therefore do not be partners with them.

We will all continue to sin as long as we are shackled to this body of the flesh. Paul's concern is that his readers are actually engaged in the struggle, for there were many takes on Christianity then and many today that minimize sin. Basking unrepentantly in sin is dangerous. Such a man is an "idolater" in at least two ways. First, he elevates the base passions of this world above God. Second, he refashions God contrary to how He has revealed Himself. He imagines and then worships a God Who is indifferent to sin. Paul argued that such things were not in keeping with the coming kingdom, so abandon them now. Otherwise, you might be deluding yourself about your place in that kingdom.

There are many things in our day that the spokesmen for our culture insist that God cares nothing about. But, if we are to trust His Word, He cares about them deeply. The Bible holds the keys to “abundant life” but the “empty words” of those who minimize the dangers of sin set the Bible at odds with “real life.” If a man is content with His life, he’s probably just lazy. Sexual indiscretions are explained away as the high-water mark of personal freedom. These are all “empty words.”

II. The Practice of the Light (8–14)

A. Living as Light Is Not Solely Prohibitive verses 8, 9

⁸For you were once darkness, 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)

Certainly, we must not do those things that are inappropriate for God’s people, but a godly life is not just a vacuum of purged evil. Light has its own virtues that are to be as aggressively pursued as the deeds of darkness are to be abandoned. These virtues are described as “fruit of the light.” “Goodness” refers to moral excellence as well as a generous spirit. “Righteousness” speaks to a high regard for integrity, justice and fairness. When the ancients spoke of truth, they never meant simply a body of beliefs adhered to. Truth always had to be lived. This is certainly true of the absolute truth that God has revealed to His saints. Such virtues authenticate the presence of God in our lives.

B. Seek God's Will verse 10

¹⁰and find out what pleases the Lord.

To “find out what pleases the Lord” means to discover it by way of testing. If a person is living in open rebellion against God’s Word, pleasing the Lord will be a matter of heart repentance, but knowing God’s will in other matters is not so cut and dry. To do God’s will is not simply a matter of following a desire. God’s call can be awakened by a great desire, but often, our desires resist God’s call. We test God’s will by belonging to a church and by forging relationships of accountability. We test God’s will by seeking the council of godly shepherds who will level with us about our gifts and the usefulness of our passion to the Kingdom. We test God’s will by finding our place in the Body through loving acts of service rather than by waiting for some subjective tap on the shoulder.

In Oklahoma, I knew a young man who loved working the oil rigs. He said it was in his blood. Work was scarce in the industry. He turned down several local jobs so that he could travel many hours to work a rig. Was it God’s will? He always convinced himself that it was, but while he was gone weeks at a time, his little girls missed him, he fought many temptations on the road and yielded to a few. Was he really trying to “test” God’s will or was he just determined to affirm his own desires?

He liked to rationalize his self-willed recklessness by insisting that God needs witnesses everywhere. The fact is, Jesus **would** go to such people, but I’m not sure that He sends such self-absorbed children. Not everything that stirs you or every passion that captures your imagination is necessarily God’s will for your life. Do you belong to a body of believers? That is His will. Are you in relationships with people who will love you enough to be honest with you? That is also His will. These are better ways to test what pleases the Lord than to simply follow your passions.

C. Escape and Expose Futile Behavior verses 11-14

¹¹Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. ¹³But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴for 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.”

Some things are too shameful to even talk about, but when they infiltrate the Christian community, we would be remiss not to address them. In 1 Corinthians 5, a man was having an affair with his father’s wife. This scandal even made the lewd citizenry of Corinth blush, but no one in the church seemed bothered. They ignored that issue while they exhausted their emotional resources arguing about which of them was the most spiritual. Paul could not process such indifference to purity. Such things need God’s light shed upon them so that they can be exposed and, perhaps, repented of.

Next, Paul quoted words that were familiar to his readers even though we don’t know where they came from: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” One of the more compelling theories for the origin of these words is that they were lyrics to an early hymn, perhaps, one sung at baptisms. We know that Paul liked to take people back to their baptisms and the statements made there and the images portrayed there when he wanted to remind them of whose they were. Regardless of where these precise lyrics came from, they had the effect of reminding Christians who were becoming indifferent to sin, “Snap out of it!”

D. Exercise Great Diligence verses 15-17

¹⁵Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

Actor Peter O’Toole was once asked why he often wore two watches at the same time. “Life is too short,” he replied, “to risk wasting precious seconds glancing at the wrong wrist.” The careful guarding of time was important to Paul. We are to “be careful.” We are not to walk through life as though we are disengaged from God’s wisdom, for wisdom is always available to a prayerful Christian. Our days are a limited commodity. We will one day stand accountable before God for how we used them. We must make the most of our opportunities, “because the days are evil”. That means that a disengaged and passive stroll through life is a recipe for disaster. If we do not use our time wisely, we will use it idly, and time used idly usually leads to time used sinfully.

E. Embrace an Authentic Means of Coping with Life verse 18

¹⁸Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

Drunkness abounded in the first-century world. These days offers even more “escapes” and excesses; alcohol is still with us, but so are drugs, eighty-hour work weeks, binge spending on credit, becoming a couch potato, and so on. In this escapist sense, one can even turn to religious busyness.

There is an alternative that is wholesome and real. Be filled with the Spirit - know His truth, sense His guidance, obey His commands - for He alone can satisfy the cravings of the human heart. Being filled with the Spirit is not some fuzzy religious experience. It is the consequence of yielding your will to His, for the Spirit can only fill an empty vessel. Walking closely with Jesus brings power to a life that no sin of excess can match. It brings exhilaration to a spirit that no recreation can duplicate.

III. The Praise of the Light (19, 20)

A. People of the Light Are a Singing People verse 19

¹⁹Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,

"Speaking to one another" refers to any kind of utterance, so Paul may have in mind a formal worship setting, but also any other venue where comfort, counsel or encouragement in song is useful. There are a variety of ideas as to what these specific musical genres are, but the fact that there is a variety makes me feel pretty good and affirmed about our commitment to a blend of styles.

"Psalms" likely means the Old Testament psalms, which were a part of early Christian worship and in some senses, still are. "Hymns" were a Greek genre of music that exalted some heroic figure or one of their many gods. Obviously, when Christians appropriated this genre, the object of such praise was Jesus. "Spiritual songs" could mean songs the Holy Spirit uses to teach, convict or inspire, or, it could mean songs that the Spirit continues to give to His people – you know, some of that new-fangled, contemporary stuff. Every great song was new once, and I suspect that our manifold God is less locked into particular styles and preferences than His people tend to be.

God is not offended by variety. On the contrary, His manifold character leads me to believe that He relishes in it. The heart of the verse is "make music in your heart." Music, like any authentic expression of worship, must be born of inner sincerity. If Christ in you gives you anything about which to sing, don't over-analyze the text or scrutinize the style of the music. Just sing!

B. People of the Light Are a Grateful People verse 20

²⁰always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul returns to the theme of perpetual thankfulness. Thanksgiving keeps our spirits high. Thanksgiving enables us to trust that the hand of God is upon our lives even in hardship. Thanksgiving lifts our minds above our fear of our circumstances and above our grievances with difficult people. Consistent thanksgiving keeps our attention consistently riveted to God.

God has redeemed us for His eternal Kingdom. He is entitled to set the standard for decorum as high as He pleases. In this body, we will miss that standard, but there is forgiveness all along the way. The one thing we cannot do is adopt a posture of indifference to the standard, for that is evidence that we do not take this whole "life as light" thing to heart, and we owe God more than that.