

Ephesians 5:8-14

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Children of Light - March 22, 2020

Ephesians 5:8-14

It is easy to say that we are living in dark times right now. You hardly need me to tell you about Covid-19 and the sudden, disruptive, and staggering ways this illness has taken over our lives. So many questions, so few answers, so much confusion. Clearly, when such times arise for us — and they have done so before and will invariably do so again — we always call such situations “dark.” Notice that it’s not white and black but light and dark. It is far too easy to associate whiteness with good and blackness with evil but such associations are just plain wrong. There is nothing inherently good about whiteness or bad about blackness. They are opposites on the color wheel, yes, but instead of opposing each other, they actually compliment each other. They are equally necessary. White can only be defined as white when we understand what black is. Likewise, black can only make sense when we are familiar with white.

So why this discussion of colors? Just as the colors white and black need each other to define each other, the concepts of lightness and darkness make no sense unless we understand light as the absence of darkness and darkness as the absence of light.

Perhaps this already makes sense to you, but the reality is that for most people, there is a great deal of confusion on how we define what light is and what dark is. How do we know? Well, just look at what we are dealing with in the world today. Everyone agrees that the advancing wave of the Coronavirus is a dark, evil thing. No one wants it, we all wish it had never happened, we are dreading the weeks ahead because we will all personally know people who will get it.

But while the virus itself is dark, there is an endless array of light and dark choices on how to respond to it. That’s where the difficulty arises. There are many well-meaning people who are in positions of responsibility and authority on how to deal with this terrible situation. The problem is that among all these well-meaning people, there is no unanimous agreement on what to do.

Our scripture encourages us to be “Children of Light.” In other words, we are supposed to find out what is pleasing to the Lord and act accordingly. But what exactly is pleasing to the Lord? How can we tell what to do at a time when very few things are plainly black or plainly white, but mostly a varying shade of gray.

This week, for example, leaders have been wrestling with the decision of whether to lock down their states or not to lock them down or even how much to lock them down. Is that a “dark” or “light” decision? Obviously, no elected official would want to be accused of deliberately exposing people to a virus when it could have been prevented. But at the same time, locking down a state will and already is throwing huge numbers of people out of work — people who will suffer economically, will need to get food, will need to pay rents and mortgages. So much to decide. So much gray.

At the same time, there are, during this pandemic, clear choices between following the light or hiding in the darkness. We’ve heard about certain US Senators selling large amounts of stock after learning in secret briefings that the virus was going to affect our nation badly — selling stock well before the stock

market collapsed. If this is true, that some officials used their inside knowledge to make a profit, that is clearly wrong. Likewise, we have seen certain store owners raise the prices for necessities like hand sanitizers, toilet paper, and other cleaners. That too, is wrong.

But what about people who bought huge quantities of such items for themselves? Was that wrong? Maybe you're among them. Such decisions are driven by fear. Fear can be a good thing. It can make us act quickly to save our lives and the lives of those around us. However, we have also seen that when the fears of a few turn into the panic of many, everyone can get hurt. Rationally speaking, the factories supplying our supermarkets are very much open. The delivery trucks are rolling down the road even as we speak. The empty shelves will be replenished. Yes, we are using a lot more hand sanitizer these days (I hope) so there might be some shortages of that. Otherwise, we're not eating more food or washing our clothes more than before so we shouldn't fear. Yet we do. Light or dark? Pleasing to the Lord, or not? Hard to tell.

We are in a crisis. What we are facing right now has been compared with World War II or even the Great Depression. I'm sorry, but that's just not true. The Covid-19 virus is a terrible thing. No doubt. But it will come to an end. It may be a few weeks or several months, but it will come to an end. World War II lasted years. The Great Depression was over a decade. What all these events have in common is that they force us to think. They force us to make choices. These events are similar in that the opportunities to choose between the light and the dark become much more pronounced. Our choices can have much greater impact.

What does that mean for Christians? Do we have a different perspective on light and darkness from the rest of the world? With the exceptions of the Hitlers of the world, everyone believes they are on the side of light and against the forces of darkness. But is there a way for us, who say we follow Jesus Christ, to better define our choices in terms of following the path of light?

Jesus told his followers, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." In other words, Christians are supposed to be bearers of light. It is not simply a matter of choosing between light and dark in our everyday lives. Rather, Christians are to be proactive. Yes, proactive. We are not to simply sit around and wait for the choices to come to us, then decide what to do. No, we are expected, as Children of Light, to be active observers of what is going on in around us and take action!

In short, we cannot wait to be told what to do. We cannot drift along, living our lives as we normally do and then, when confronted with a choice, then make a decision. We need instead to ask ourselves what we can do, right now, where we are, with the situation around us.

I'm not talking about saving the world. Nobody, no government, no leader is going to do that. Jesus Christ is our one and only Savior. Rather, we need to look around our homes, our communities, our friends, and ask ourselves today what can we do.

The question is what is our guiding principle to be? If we are to be proactive in bringing light to the world, what will guide us in making the right decisions? In Paul's understanding, Children of Light stand firmly on the side of honesty, justice and goodness. Why? Because you, me, those we know, those we don't know — in short the entire community — we are all part of the same family.

Friends, here is how we can evaluate our thoughts and actions as Children of Light:

How about honesty? There are three dimensions to honesty. Typically, we think of honesty as being able to tell the truth to others, like a witness at a trial. Mutual honesty is essential for human society to work because we have to trust each other. You may have heard it said that the most important thing we have in life costs nothing, but if we lose it, we lose everything. That, of course, is our reputation. If we are not people who can be trusted to say and do the right thing, not sometimes but all the time, we are nothing. Now that does not mean that our choices are always correct. Nobody is always right. However, when we do what we do for honest reasons, we maintain our reputations. Who knows, someday we may be proven right!

Honesty extends beyond our relationship with others. Before we can be honest with others, we have to be honest with ourselves. We have to be able to ask ourselves if the person inside our skin is the same as the person we present to the world. I've found in many cases people who are extremely angry or vocal about something are being dishonest with themselves. They know there is a conflict between what they say on the outside and feel on the inside.

Finally, we have to be honest with God. To have faith means that we believe that there is a God who made us, knows us, and loves us right now. However, are we honest in our relationship with God? Can we fully appreciate that the God who knows everything we have done in life — the things we are proud of and the things we are ashamed of — God knows and God loves us anyway. To be honest with God means truly believing with every fiber of our being that God really and truly and totally loves us. When we believe it, when we accept that God welcomes us as we are, we will know that we are never alone in this world — no matter what is happening.

We now come to the question of justice. Jesus' idea of justice is similar to those put forward by most philosophers and religions, "do to others as you would have them do to you." Simple, isn't it? If we are fair with each other, if we trust each other, if we love each other fully, then there would be perfect justice on the earth. Of course, this is not the case. I don't have to describe the injustices in this world, injustices which Covid-19 is making even worse. Moreover, in Jesus' view, the idea of justice is an active thing. He tells us to **do**. He asks us to take the initiative. He commands us to get involved in the often foul, unequal, unfair situations of life and commit ourselves to making a difference! In other words, we need to actively seek out injustice in the world and try our best to fix it.

Finally, we raise the standard of goodness. To be a child of light, we have to be good. Well, yes, we've been told to be good from the day we were born. But what is goodness? As children, being good was not punching your brother and finishing your peas and carrots — supposedly easy things to do but often impossible for a child. As we grow, goodness becomes more complicated. As Christians, our

standard is Jesus Christ. We are called to learn about his life and then act as he did in the world. Needless to say, none of us are able to copy Jesus' life and living totally. If we could, we'd be God and certainly wouldn't need Jesus.

But we all fall short. We do not always follow the examples, many examples, Jesus set for us. We sometimes avoid people who are different from us. We avoid those who are poor, sick, or inferior. We are often more interested in having the biggest this or the best that instead of using our talents and abilities to help everybody have a little something. We are silent when we should be speaking out. We keep grudges and remember the ways others have hurt us instead of forgiving them and letting it all go. Rather than choosing to be good, too often we choose to be safe. Yes, Jesus risked it all to be good. For his efforts, he got himself killed. Such can be the price of goodness — death from the hands of a not-good world.

So do we give up? Being honest is hard. Doing justice is hard. Pursuing goodness is hard. Who wants to be a child of light when is it so much easier to crawl under a rock and hide in the darkness?

That is a choice we can make. God gave us the ability to choose from the moment we were created. Far too often, we have made the wrong choices as individuals, as nations, as races, as genders — not once, but over and over again.

God sent Jesus into the world to demonstrate that the world does not have to be the way it is. There are alternatives. There are better choices. There are ways, in short, to follow the light. It is not easy. In fact, one of the best ways to determine if we are walking in the light is that the pathway of light is sometimes very hard, very discouraging, and can make us want to give up.

But what choice do we have? Who is satisfied, truly deep-down satisfied, with the way things are — whether it is in the world or with ourselves? Are we content living with the knowledge that we have the power to change things for the better but choose not to? Perhaps we are. Perhaps this Jesus stuff is irrelevant.

What, however, can compare with the satisfaction of knowing we have made the world a better place? What can compare with the joy of going beyond the basics of life and instead reaching out to address the many evils going on today? Why not. Why not follow Jesus and change the world! As children of God, why not, why not, choose to walk in the light!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.