

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

Children of the Light

Ephesians 5:6-14

Mark Vroegop

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern 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 speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you (Eph. 5:6-14).

A few weeks ago, my wife and I helped our third son, Jeremiah, and his wife, Kristen, move to St. Louis. Driving around the city, I was fascinated with its history. There are sections of the city that point to a time in US history where the city must have been thriving and large. At one point, St. Louis was among the top ten largest cities in the country, and it famously hosted the World’s Fair in 1904.

You probably know the most famous symbol is the St. Louis Arch. It’s a tribute to the Eads Bridge, which was the first steel bridge to cross the Mississippi River south of the Missouri River. St. Louis and the Eads Bridge became the gateway to the western United States. The city reached its zenith through the vast railroad system that opened to the West. St. Louis became “Grand Central Station” for the entire country.

But by the mid-1900s air travel began to compete with trains for transportation. And St. Louis was no longer the main throughfare to the West. St. Louis today isn’t even in the top seventy-five largest cities in the United States. The invention of the airplane changed everything. It’s still a great city, but there are clear signs that there was a previous era where things were really booming.

I’m intrigued by historical transitions like what happened to St. Louis. One reason is that we are living in the middle of a time of rapid change ourselves. Technological advances, changes in demographics, shifts in religious beliefs, increased political volatility, and coming through a global pandemic have all affected the world in which we live. The world is changing rapidly. And we need to adapt.

This week I received a new book called *The Great Dechurching*—an evaluation of a massive shift happening in church attendance. The back of the book says, “We are currently experiencing the largest and fastest religious shift in U.S. history. This shift is greater than the First and Second Great Awakenings combined—but in the opposite direction. Tens of millions of regular Christian worshippers have decided to stop attending church.”

I share this not because I have a dark view of the church or its future, but to help you realize that the climate around us is changing rapidly. You probably see it in your extended family, at work, at school, and in the media. Life is not becoming less complicated. It's not becoming easier to be a faithful Christian. And it's important to prayerfully consider how we should think about the world and ourselves.

Thankfully, the book of Ephesians provides the kind of clarity, encouragement, and vision that we need. Paul writes with a level of practicality that is refreshing. The goal of Ephesians is to help us "become who we are." The aim is to help Christians with their spiritual identity as they live in the real world.

For the last few weeks, we've been seeing the connection between identity and actions. Last week we saw the direct application of our identity to our morality. The gospel transforms the intimate and personal aspects of who we are.

This week and next week feature verses that highlight the need for wisdom—the practical application of biblical truth. **Living out your Christian identity requires wisdom.** And we'll see this in three ways: You need to be (1) cautious with influences, (2) intentional with discernment, and (3) courageous with godliness.

Life is complicated. Our culture isn't becoming more Christian. That isn't new. We have historical truths to help us navigate the world in which we live.

1) Cautious with Influences

Paul continues with another pastoral caution. It's linked to the previous verse where he drew a line in the sand by saying that "everyone who is immoral . . . has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ" (Eph. 5:6). It seems that Paul knows the danger of some people trying to live in both worlds—Christian identity and immorality. And his point is simple: Christian identity without morality is an illusion.

In verses 6-7, Paul reinforces this point from a different angle and expands the application. He's concerned that Christians might be influenced in their thinking and relationships.

What you know and who you know shape what you do.

In verse 6, he talks about the problem of deceiving words. Paul takes his warning about not inheriting the kingdom of Christ a step further. He reminds them that immorality isn't just something uncharacteristic of a Christian, but it also brings about the judgment of God. He says, "because of these things, the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (v. 6). Immorality is wrong for everyone.

No one can say, "Well, I'm not a Christian, so who cares if I'm immoral." It's not as if Paul is identifying two standards of morality. Sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong because it violates God's command for the entire created order. Human beings find creative ways to rationalize their violation of God's sexual ethics, and it's part of the reason why the world is under judgment.

Paul's point to Christians is that this kind of behavior is what's wrong with the world. Why are you acting this way? And he's resisting the typical human strategy to find a way to justify immorality. In his day,

there was a philosophy called Gnosticism that taught there was a distinction between your body and your soul. It posited that these were entirely distinct from one another. You could do whatever you wanted with the body. It was the soul that really mattered. You can imagine what this led to. Paul addressed this philosophical cancer in multiple letters (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:9-20). The problem, however, is that the cultural narrative was hard to battle.

That's why Paul says, "let no one deceive you with empty words" (v. 6). These are the kinds of words that lack the substance of God's truth. Paul uses similar language in other places:

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ (Col. 2:8).

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error (Rom. 1:21-27).

Paul cautions Christians about not being aware of the philosophical influences in our lives. In his day it was the Gnostics. In our day it's this post-modern mentality that truth is found within myself. Whatever I feel, whoever I love, whatever I think—that's the ultimate standard. The bad news? This is a big problem. The good news? It's not a new problem. We have the Word of God to help us navigate a world filled with sinful brokenness.

Be cautious with influences in your mind, but also with your relationships. That's what he says in verse 7: "Do not become partners with them." Now, he's not saying that you should only be friends with Christians with an emphasis on personal separation. Too often when the church faces strong cultural forces, she over-corrects with a massive societal retreat. One of the mistakes of the fundamentalist movement was thinking that avoidance and insulation was the best answer. That's not going to work.

On the other hand, Paul says something similar to what we learned last week. Namely, that Christians have to be prepared to be different. The phrase "become partners" is also used in Ephesians 3:6 to describe the connection that Gentiles have to the promises of God. The Greek word can mean someone who participates or shares in something. In this context, it means to share in a lifestyle or a morality.

Another way to translate this would be a spouse. The Bible is really clear that, if you are a Christian, marrying a non-Christian is out of bounds (1 Cor. 7:39). This is where wisdom is really needed because it's easy to allow feelings and affections to take the priority over biblical principles.

Paul is cautioning us about the philosophical and relational influences of our lives. Living out your identity as a Christian requires an ethic. And the pursuit of that morality involves thinking carefully about what is shaping how we live.

2) Intentional with Discernment

Verse 10 carries the main thrust of this point with the other verses supporting it. I merely want to highlight it now and come back to it: “try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” That’s an important statement, and it’s pretty open-ended.

Before we unpack what verse 10 means, notice that Paul returns back to the primary issue of identity. It’s fascinating and instructive to me that when he talks about actions, he keeps coming back to who they are. A primary motivation for righteousness is understanding who you really are in Christ. Paul is emphasizing again and again that they are transformed people.

Verse 8 highlights the contrast to what kind of people they used to be. “At one time you were darkness . . .” Notice that he doesn’t say, “You were walking in darkness” or “You were practicing deeds of the darkness.” It’s more definitive and more connected to identity. You were darkness. Paul isn’t being mean or judgmental here. He’s reminding them that their problem, apart from Christ, was not just what they did. It was who they were. That’s why they needed Jesus. How do you change who you are? You can’t. It’s beyond your reach and ability.

Paul doesn’t stay there. The “you were darkness” is to set up what’s next: “you are light in the Lord.” This means that there is something within them, created by a sovereign act and glorious grace, that images the very essence of God. The miracle of conversion means that there is something miraculous about who you are that connects with the heart and image of God. You love what he loves. You delight in him.

If this identity issue is this transformative, then it will result in intentional actions. Look at 8b: “walk as children of light.” Paul just keeps coming back to this over and over. Identity and actions are linked together. We see this repeated with the parenthetical comment “for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.” A life of light yields basic moral qualities that fit with the character of God.

There’s an expected cause and effect here. Identity and actions are so closely linked that the right behaviors should be assumed. Apple trees produce apples. Jesus offered this warning about false teachers, those who make convincing arguments but the fruit of their lives lead to chaos:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits (Matt. 7:15-20).

A friend of mine says, “Truth and time go together.”

What about verse 10? If it's true that identity and actions are linked, and if it's true that fruit is inevitable, then those who are light in the Lord should intentionally strive to consider what is pleasing to the Lord. The idea is to strive to live in such a way that fits with who you are in Christ. This is going to take effort, wisdom, time, and intentional living.

This isn't the only place where Paul talks like this. Consider these two verses:

So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him (2 Cor. 5:9).

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2).

It seems that Paul knows Christians are going to face complicated decisions in a sinful world. He sets a helpful and compelling target here: "try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord." This isn't easy. But one way to be sure that you don't please the Lord is to never think about what it means to please the Lord.

Christian identity requires that you do the hard work to think "What pleases God here?" Hopefully these messages are putting that kind of thought into your mind and heart in a new way. It means that you live in the world. You go to work and school. You work out at a gym and shop at a grocery store. You get an education, work hard, build relationships, and participate in society. But the way you do it has to be different than most of the people around you. And the percentage of people who share "light values" is getting smaller and smaller.

Therefore, that means you have to be more intentional with your discernment. Wisdom requires that you have to think carefully about what it means to please the Lord. Not how to be popular, not how to be powerful, not how to make a ton of money, not how to be influential. If you are a Christian, your goal is to please the Lord. And that takes intentional discernment.

3) Courageous with Godliness

This final section seems to relate to what it's really like to live in a dark world as people of the light. Paul identifies that there will be collision between light and darkness. At times, this will be difficult. And yet we are called to live courageously with godliness in a dark world.

The first statement, in verse 11, at first sounds similar to what we've seen before: "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness." That fits with what we've heard Paul say before, doesn't it? There's to be a marked difference between a believer and a non-believer.

However, Paul adds something new. He says, "expose them." What does that mean? It means to highlight or to show people the difference between a life of light and darkness. It means that there are cases in which you must say, "This is wrong. I can't do this." There are moments in a Christian's life when you have to be courageous with your godliness. You can't remain silent.

The way in which you do this needs to be tempered with the command to please the Lord. This isn't a call for new discernment bloggers who make their living rebuking people. This is call for a Christ-like conviction that simply says, "This isn't right."

Verse 12 emphasizes the clear lines of distinction that should be made between darkness and light, and it seems that Paul is emphasizing not only verbal confrontation but also the convicting presence of a godly life. Sometimes words are necessary. At other times, the mere presence of a righteous person is sufficient. But words and actions require courage.

The contrast between light and darkness makes things clear. Verse 13 communicates this truth. One commentator says, "Men and women not only receive the light, but become luminous. Such is the work of Christian evangelism."¹ The first part of verse 14 brings this home. The light of gospel has an effect.

The text concludes with a very interesting statement. Actually, it's a quotation. Notice that the text says, "Therefore it says..." Paul is quoting someone or something. But there's no matching Bible verse. What follows is likely part of a baptismal hymn, something the congregation would say or sing over someone as they emerged from the water.

"Awake, O sleeper and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Think of it like an anthem that reminds Christians who they are. Imagine the church saying this to one another. Think of it as a way for Paul to drive home a powerful and meaningful way.

How timely this word is! Every generation of Christians needs to determine how to be light in a dark world. That requires wisdom: to be cautious with influences, to be intentional with discernment, and to be courageous with godliness.

"Awake, O sleeper and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

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¹ Francis Foulkes, [*Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 152.