

## CHILDREN OF LIGHT

Ephesians 5:6-21

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 19, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 5, verses 6 through 21. It is on page 829 of the pew Bible. In this epistle lesson, Paul continues to speak of who we are as children of God and how that affects the way we live. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Ephesians 5, beginning at verse 6, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not become partners with them; <sup>8</sup> for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), <sup>10</sup> and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. <sup>13</sup> But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, <sup>14</sup> for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

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

<sup>15</sup> Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, <sup>16</sup> making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. <sup>17</sup> Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. <sup>18</sup> And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, <sup>20</sup> giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Who are you? Think about that question a little bit. Who are you? What's the best answer you can give to that question?

I remember someone asking me that question once, so I said, “My name's Dan.” And he said, “No, no, I don't mean your name. I mean, *Who are you?*” So I said, “Dan ... Antal.” He said, “Yeah, yeah, I know that already. But who are you?” I was a little confused, because I didn't know what he was getting at, so I just started listing off stuff about myself like who my parents and siblings are, where I worked, where I went to school—that kind of stuff. And he said, “No, I don't care what you do. I want to know who you are.” I was starting to get frustrated, but I stopped and thought to myself, *Okay, what's the best answer I can give to this question?* So I

thought for a moment, and then I said, “I’m a child of God.” Since the guy was a Christian, I thought maybe this is what he was getting at, but it wasn’t. So when that answer wasn’t good enough for him I didn’t know what else to say. I never did figure out what exactly he was getting at, but it did make me stop and think about my identity and what is most important to who I am. And it’s this: that I am a child of God. And the same thing is true for every Christian. More important than what your name is, where you work, where you go to school, where you live, and even who you’re married to—for the believer in Christ, more important than all those things is the fact that you are a child of God.

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In this text Paul speaks of our identity and how that identity impacts every aspect of our lives. If the most important part of our identity is that we are children of God, then that fact should be the most important factor in how we live. As children of God, we reflect his nature.

And Paul hones in on one particular aspect of God’s nature—that God is light (1 John 1:5). And if God is light, then we are children of light. Therefore, since we “are light in the Lord,” Paul tells us to “walk as children of light” (5:8).

And, as always, the order of things is important. It’s not, “Walk in the light so that you might *become* children of light.” That’s the way our minds tend to work. Our default position is to think that our behavior dictates our identity, but it’s really the other way around. Our identity dictates our behavior, or, at least, it should. That’s Paul’s point here. We do not become children of God by doing the things God requires. Rather, we try to do what is pleasing to God because he already *has* made us his children through Jesus Christ.

Paul writes to people who used to be darkness, but now they are light (5:8). He uses the contrast between darkness and light to describe the difference between evil and good. Darkness provides a covering for evil, but when light comes it exposes everything for what it is. This can be uncomfortable, but it’s good, because truth is good. And light always does this. Light can’t help but expose the darkness. It’s what it does. Paul says, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (5:11). Part of our purpose in the world is to actually expose evil for what it is. Sometimes this can take an active form, that is, when we intentionally say that something is evil or when we confront someone who is engaged in a particular sin. When this is done in a loving way with an eye toward repentance and restoration, this is good; it’s the right thing to do.

And exposing the darkness for the evil it is can also take a passive form. Even if we don’t specifically confront a particular sin, when we live as light in the world it causes the contrast between light and darkness to be seen. The light cannot help but expose the darkness; it’s what it does.

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I suppose there are several different sins that characterize darkness. In the verses just before this reading Paul mentions a few of them. But there’s one that he mentions in this reading: the sin of drunkenness. I don’t know if we’ve ever talked much about drunkenness, but it’s worth talking about, because it’s apparently a problem here in Grand Forks.

I saw a study a few months ago. It was reported by a few different major media outlets. Maybe you saw it too. It ranked Grand Forks as the eighth drunkest city in the United States (source: 24/7 Wall St; also reported by USA Today, NBC, etc.). Fargo was ranked fifth, so North Dakota got two in the top ten. The only state that was worse was Wisconsin. They got seven in

the top ten. So Wisconsin obviously got the most attention, but North Dakota got two in the top ten, and our city is one of them. Now we don't get into the national news very often, so to get in for being one of the drunkest cities in America should probably bother us. And when we come across a biblical text that mentions drunkenness, it might be worth talking about.

Now what is it that makes drunkenness a sin? Sometimes it's helpful to understand why a particular action is sinful. God doesn't just give us arbitrary rules in order to test us or make our lives difficult. There is always a purpose to his commandments. We might not always be able to discern that purpose, and when that's the case, we still obey the commandment. But whenever possible, it's helpful to understand what is wrong with a particular action. So what makes drinking too much wine or beer or whatever it is—what makes it sinful? What makes it different than drinking too much pop, which can also be very unhealthy and falls into the sin of gluttony? But what makes drunkenness a sin?

First, just to be clear, I'm not saying that all consumption of alcohol is sinful, okay? If I run into you at a restaurant, you don't have to hide your beer. There are several places in Scripture where alcohol is actually spoken of positively. For example, fine wine is used to describe the new creation (Is. 25:6). And there are even examples of our Lord Jesus serving or using alcohol (e.g., John 2:1-11; Matt. 11:19; Mark 14:22-25). So alcohol itself is not evil, and not all consumption is sinful. Sin does not occur every time alcohol is used. Sin occurs when it is *abused*. And this is the case with at least most sins. Sin lies not in the *use* of a thing, but in the *abuse* or the *misuse* of the thing. You can go through the Ten Commandments and see this. For example, it's not a sin to use God's Name, but it is a sin to *misuse* it. That's the Second Commandment. And it's not a sin to use a knife, but it is a sin to *misuse* it by thrusting it into your neighbor. That would be the Fifth Commandment. And you can go through the Ten Commandments and identify how at least most of them involve the *misuse* of something good. So the *use* of alcohol is not necessarily sinful, but the *misuse* of it is.

So how do we misuse it? For us in twenty-first century America, there's a Fourth Commandment aspect to the misuse of alcohol. The Fourth Commandment, by the way, has to do with obedience to authority—first to our parents, but also to other God-ordained institutions like the government. So if the government says the drinking age is twenty-one, then any use of alcohol by someone under that age is a misuse and a sin against God, because it's disobedience to authority. Another way we can break the Fourth Commandment with alcohol is by driving while intoxicated. The government also has a law against this. Driving drunk can also violate the Fifth Commandment when we cause bodily harm to our neighbor or the Seventh Commandment when we cause damage to our neighbor's property. These are just a few of the ways specific to the twenty-first century that the abuse of alcohol can be a sin.

But these things didn't really apply in the first century when Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus. I don't think the Roman Empire had a legal drinking age. They also didn't have laws about riding your camel while intoxicated. So it wasn't a sin against the government like it can be today. So what made it sinful?

Drunkenness causes our bodies and minds to not function the way God created them to. It impairs everything, and this is bad because it goes against the way God designed our bodies to work. It impairs our ability to move and think. It impairs our ability to love our neighbor. And the part of our being that drunkenness seems to have the biggest effect on is our conscience. And you can tell me if you think I'm wrong. But I think the primary reason God forbids

drunkenness is because of the harmful effect it has on our consciences. Too much alcohol dulls our senses, but it also dulls our conscience, and this is bad.

One way alcohol can affect our conscience is that it can be a temporary remedy for a guilty conscience. In this way it dulls the conscience *after* we sin. You're feeling guilty about a certain sin, and you don't want to feel that way anymore, and there's a bottle that says you don't have to feel that way. But the problem is, if you're guilty you're still guilty, whether you feel like it or not, and the temporary remedy of the bottle is going to wear off. The only cure for a guilty conscience is forgiveness. A guilty conscience remains guilty until it becomes a good conscience through the cross of Jesus Christ. But sometimes our consciences can still *feel* guilty, even after we have been forgiven and granted a good conscience. But when that happens, the solution is still the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins. So find someone, like a pastor or another Christian, to confess your sins to. Then their job is to tell you that your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. This is the real solution to a guilty conscience. You can't drink the guilt away. It only feels that way for a short time. Then it comes back worse than ever.

The other way alcohol can affect our consciences is that it dulls them *before* we sin. A properly functioning conscience tells us what is or is not a sin, and it prevents us from committing those sins. And this is more than just an intellectual function of the conscience. It's related to our emotions as well. A properly functioning conscience throws up an emotional barrier before we sin. But too much alcohol weakens this barrier. It might cause us to forget that certain things are sinful. But, even more so, it weakens that emotional barrier that our consciences put up. So then drunkenness leads to all sorts of other sins that we might not commit when we are sober. This, I think, explains the link between drunkenness and debauchery. Debauchery, by the way, is a wild, disorderly, and sinful lifestyle. It's kind of the opposite of sinning in secret. It's sinning openly and carelessly with no regard for what is appropriate in a given context.

So this, as best as I can tell, is the reason drunkenness is prohibited by God: it dulls everything in our body and mind, but especially our consciences. And remember, the use of alcohol in general is not prohibited. It's the *misuse* and *abuse* that is prohibited. I hope that helps to clarify that God doesn't give us arbitrary rules, but that his commandments are actually good for us.

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In contrast to drunkenness, Paul says, "Be filled with the Spirit" (5:18). Now what does that mean? Unfortunately there's a little bit of theological baggage attached to this phrase which we need to clear up. It kind of makes us think of someone who's just so caught up in the Holy Spirit that they lose control of themselves. They might even be speaking gibberish or rolling around on the floor or something like that. But the notion that losing control of yourself is what it means to be filled with the Spirit is a fairly modern phenomenon, and it doesn't fit the biblical witness.

In Scripture, speaking in tongues was really quite rare and was always intelligible speech, just in a different language (Acts 2:1-13). And rolling around on the ground uncontrollably was actually a sign of demon possession (Luke 4:35; 9:42), not being filled with the Spirit. One of the fruits of Spirit is self-control (Gal. 5:23). So being filled with the Spirit does not mean losing control of yourself. That would actually be more typical of drunkenness. Being filled with the

Spirit is the opposite of that. So we want to separate the idea of being filled with the Spirit from the modern theological baggage attached to it.

So what does it mean? Fortunately, Paul describes exactly what it means. And this is how he describes it: “Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:19-21).

Now remember, it’s not that we get filled up with the Spirit by singing and giving thanks. That would be another reversal of the proper order. The Holy Spirit is given to each believer as a gift. Scripture teaches that he is given to us in Baptism (Acts 2:38). So singing and giving thanks simply describes the activity of a congregation of believers who already are filled with the Spirit.

We give thanks always and for everything because we realize that everything we have is a gift of God’s grace. From the air we breathe, to the food we eat, to the roof over our heads—from the forgiveness of sins, to the gift of the Holy Spirit, to the hope of the resurrection of the dead—we give thanks to God for all these things in the name of Jesus Christ. We realize that every single one of these good things is a gift from God. And none of them are given to us just because. Every gift God gives is given for one reason only—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Even common and ordinary gifts—things that everyone in the world enjoys, like oxygen, food, and shelter—these gifts are given to us because Jesus died for us.

And this might take a little while to grasp, because we take these things for granted. They seem like plain, physical gifts, not spiritual gifts. But every good gift is from the Father, and we deserve nothing good from him apart from Jesus Christ.

After the fall into sin, there was really no reason for God to sustain his creation if not for his plan to send his Son into the world as an offering for sin. And none of us deserve even the slightest thing from God—not the life in our bodies, the air we breathe, the food we eat, or the forgiveness we receive. All of these things come as a gift of God’s grace, and God’s grace is never given for no reason. It is always and only given on account of Jesus Christ. So we don’t “[give] thanks always and for everything to God the Father,” period. We “[give] thanks always and for everything to God the Father *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,*” because every good thing comes to us as a gift of God’s grace on account of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So if you ever wonder if God is still gracious to you—if you ever wonder if God still forgives your sin—here’s one way you can know: has he still given you oxygen to breathe? Because we don’t even deserve that, and if God is still giving oxygen, then he is still gracious for the sake of Jesus Christ. Even in the midst of your sin, God doesn’t revoke the gift of oxygen. And of course we see the pattern from this that God is always gracious. Even after our bodies lose the ability to breathe the oxygen God is giving us, he is still gracious for the sake of Jesus Christ, because this body will rise to live again in perfect righteousness and holiness as a child of God and a child of light.

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God has made us to be his children. He has made us to be children of light. This is who we are in Jesus Christ. There are a lot of other labels that still apply to us, including the label “sinner.” But none of these other labels identify us as truly as the label “child of God.” So we no

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longer walk in darkness; we walk in light. We worship God for this, and we give thanks for everything in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.