

Live as Children of Light

Pastor Hannah Souter

Big idea: We live as children of light not by trying harder, but by participating in our own transformation.

Purpose: To equip New Hoppers with practical tools for living out who they are: Children of Light.

Passage: Ephesians 5:1-14

Verse: Ephesians 5:8

Overview: Followers of Jesus have a fundamental new identity. In Christ, we are light in a dark world. The problem is, so long as we still live in this world, we will always know the struggle of actually living that out. Often, trying to be good and obedient is just another futile effort that leads to bitterness, self-righteousness, judgement, and even exclusion of those whom God adores. The apostle Paul paints another way—a way of true transformation in place of just trying harder.

Opening:

A few years ago, my housemate, Sari, and I went to the Ape Caves up near Mt. St. Helens. Have you been before? I remember going as a kid, too. It was always such a dramatic experience. The drippy cave walls, the thumping of my heart as I walked further into the darkness. Holding my dad's hand, stomping my shoes hard on the slippery rock as I walked because I had those cool light up shoes. I needed all the light I could get.

This last time, when I went with Sari, it was early spring—still a bit snowy—and I think it was a weekday. We only saw one other group in our mile-long trek deeper into the cave. They were on their way out.

I'm a bit afraid of the dark, not gonna lie, so this was definitely a stretch for me. When we got to a big cavern, we stopped and sat on a rock, using our headlamps to look around at the colors in the cave, the mineral formations, the places we thought bats might be living. Then Sari had the idea: let's turn off our lights. Gah! I can feel my adrenaline kick in even as I retell the story! I'm a sucker for challenges, so I agreed...and I want you to get a taste of it, too. Brace yourselves, it's going to get a little dark in here.

We clicked off our headlamps and (bam) there we were in pitch blackness. We were silent. There was no wind, no street noise, no voices, all we heard was the drip, drip, drip of the water from the cave walls. I held my hand up to my face, just inches away. I couldn't see it. I knew Sari was there, but I couldn't see her. I could only last about 60 seconds before I had to turn the light on again.

Have you had an experience like that before? Where your senses are deprived and you feel completely disoriented? In the passage we're exploring today, the apostle Paul uses this same imagery to connect us with the visceral feelings that are evoked by darkness and light.

We are in the middle of a teaching series going through the letter to the Ephesians. While this letter was written by the apostle Paul to the church in the city of Ephesus, scholars suggest that this letter was not only addressing that church specifically, but rather it was **meant to be circulated** among all the early churches in the Ancient Near East.

Scholars also suggest that this letter is in the literature category referred to as *apocalyptic*, meaning **to reveal that which is unseen**. Apocalyptic literature is full of drama and metaphor. It's an odd and exciting genre that invites the reader into an adventure, claiming that there's more than meets the eye.

The letter to the Ephesians highlighted for the early church who they were called to be in the world. In our day and age, and specifically in American Christianity, the time is ripe to ask that question once again. Who are we as followers of Jesus and who is the church called to be?

Today we'll be looking at Ephesians 5:1-14. Our scripture reader is Dave Goechius.

Scripture:

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. 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. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said:

“Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

—Ephesians 5:1-14 NIV

Commentary:

First things first, another “therefore.” As Denise mentioned last week, that little word is not inconsequential. Paul uses this word 9 times in the second half of Ephesians. The first half is all about God: Who God is, what God has done, how God sees us, how God relates to us. The second half is all about our collective life as the church, in light of the first half.

Each time Paul uses the word “therefore,” it is meant to remind us of the inextricable connection this second half of the letter has to the first.

Our living as the church—as the people of God—is not generated from ourselves. It is not God saying, “*Well, you’ve got your marching orders now. Get to it.*” Our ability to live our calling as the church is fundamentally sourced and sustained by the Spirit of God living in us and re-creating God’s character and love in us.

Paul goes on to list several behaviors and attitudes that have no place in the kingdom of God: sexual immorality, any kind of impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking. Let’s talk through those a little bit. Sounds fun, right?

The word for sexual immorality in the Greek is *pornea*, which literally translates as a *male prostitute*. But more broadly, this term refers to giving oneself over to a diminished view, or a distorted view, of God’s vision for sex and sexuality. This isn’t about ‘purity culture’ or adhering to a moral code around sex—this is about embracing the vision for sex and sexuality that God desires for us. It has a good, and right, and true place in our lives and we can trust God to lead us in that, regardless of our circumstances.

As a single person, I’ve talked to God a lot about God’s vision for sex and sexuality. *How do I let this part of me that God created have its good and right and true place in my life?* I’ve gotten it right, and I’ve gotten it wrong. The heart of God is not judgement or condemnation. God wants our wholeness, our joy, our peace and I’ve witnessed God champion that for me, even when I wasn’t championing that myself. **Do you believe that God wants freedom and healing for you in this aspect of your life?** Sometimes it can be painful to believe that, when so much of our experience speaks otherwise. But God does.

If you are struggling with your relationship to sex and sexuality— if it holds shame or confusion, fear, wounds, or even just a lack of peace, talk to God about it. Keep it in the light. Talk to a trusted friend. Reach out to me or another pastor you trust. There’s no shame here.

There is a certain kind of deception in the area of sex and sexuality that Paul warns about. Married or single, straight or gay, young or old, man or woman—when sex and sexuality become our first focus—when they become a primary object of our worship, our identity, our devotion—we are deceived. It can’t deliver on that promise of satisfaction. It can’t hold that weight. It’s not meant to.

And that’s really what this list is about. Sexual immorality, impurity, greed—that posture of entitled, self-centered living, where nothing is ever enough, where my having is more important than your flourishing—we could do a whole message on greed—Paul sums it all up as *idolatry*: giving our heart, our devotion, our focus, our energies **first** to things that can’t deliver on the promise that God can. **Our worship is only safe with God.** When we give ourselves first to other things, we harm and diminish ourselves. We harm and diminish others. As Paul goes on to say, our speech and actions will reflect it.

God cares too much about our freedom and our flourishing to allow the destruction of darkness to go on forever. There will be an end to it. Scholar Lynn Cohick puts it this way:

God's wrath is not an angry emotion; it is action that sets the wrong to right. The sober fact is that to make all things new, the old ways of sin and violence must be destroyed. This is necessary for the equation of God's new creation plan to work. In the forthcoming unity of all things under Christ (1:10), there is no place for those who reject or resist the mercy of the loving Father. Those who perpetuate violence, abuse of power, and unchecked desires are invited, through the rich mercy of God, to be made alive in Christ (2:4-5) . . . God invites us to see sin as he does, as those thoughts and practices that prevent our flourishing and tarnish the imago Dei.

—Lynn Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians*

To sin is to participate in the thoughts and practices that prevent our collective flourishing and tarnish the imago Dei, the image of God reflected uniquely in every person. Let us not be deceived.

Instead, Paul continues, remember the first half of this letter? *Remember who you are in Christ?* Remember the riches of grace lavished upon us? Remember the incomprehensible love of Christ that you are and forever will be rooted and established in? Remember the beyond-our-imagination power of God that is at work in us? **You are a Light in the Lord!!! What if we lived like that were true?** What if we said YES to the adventure of discovering—of recovering—all that is good and right, just and true in us and in the world? What if we lived as the dearly loved children of light we actually are?

Here's the thing though. What if sounds great, "*But how?*" I have little to no patience for anything that sounds like "*try harder*" or "*do better.*" 9 out of 10 times, we KNOW we are not *who* we ought to be. The question is *how*. ***How do we live as children of light in a world that's held captive in darkness?***

Striving to be better is just putting the same, shame-based fuel in a different car. I can often read the Bible with that shame-based lens: as a harsh critique of all that I'm failing at and a fresh command to do better, to try harder. It can leave a spirit of despair, of "*I'm not good enough,*" and make us just want to give up. Or, like the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, trying harder can lead to bitterness, self-righteousness, exclusion, and judgement. It puts all the focus on the self—on us—and doesn't leave any room for compassion, connection, and love.

That's not the heart of our God. That's not the spirit of God's Word. God hungers for us to know life abundant. God hungers for us to know God's peace. God hungers for us to know what it's like to be free—free to love and be loved, free to move in the world with security, with right-relationship, with peace. What we hunger for is genuine transformation, not trying harder.

In prepping for this message, I thought, "*Where do I see this transformation thing, this life-change thing, actually happening?*" In my own journey, I've learned a ton from the language and practices found in the Recovery Movement; such organizations as Alcoholics Anonymous, CoDA, and other 12 step programs. But since I'm not an expert or practitioner in that field, I wanted to learn more. Last week, I had the privilege of talking

with David McKinnon, a new friend of mine from Mt. Scott, who runs the weekly AA group here at the church. I picked his brain and we had lots of fun exploring questions like:

- How do people change?
- What's the difference between trying harder and real transformation?
- What have you learned in your years both being in recovery and working in recovery spaces?

At New Hope, we are super intentional to not just give you more information, but to invite you into practices and opportunities that engage our whole selves—to put our real, messy lives in dialogue with the wisdom of the scriptures and the heart of God. That's where we're headed now.

From my conversation with David and from the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, I've got 3 practices for us to engage with as we seek to participate in our own transformation, as we seek to **live as *children of light***.

Practice 1: Be Honest

Did you know that the 12 steps only mention alcohol twice? In the first and last step:

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Sub in whatever challenge you want. Powerless over anger, powerless over other people, powerless over sex, powerless over pornography, over judgementalism, over work, over video games, powerless over food, powerless over shopping, powerless over politics, powerless over image-control, powerless over social media, powerless over _____. Whatever it is that has a grip on us, that we can't say no to, whatever it is that we are justifying, that makes us believe it holds our freedom, our happiness, and our peace...that's our "*fruitless deed of darkness*" in Bible talk. Not that most of those things are bad in themselves—but the way in which we're using them can't deliver. It's taking us nowhere, but it's far from harmless.

Are there things in that list that resonate for you? I know there are for me. Maybe it hasn't gotten to the unmanageable stage yet. Praise God. But, still, any trace of that is like a stage 1 cancer diagnosis. The longer it stays hidden, under wraps, "no big deal," or in the dark...the more that shame and fear will feed that thing and steal your life.

That's why Paul is using such strong language: *don't have even a hint of these things*. If they go untreated, they will grow and take your life. But, he says,

...everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said:

"Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

—Ephesians 5:13-14

We often don't get the help we need because of the shame of being exposed, guilty, found out. But in Christ, that lie: "*if you really knew me you wouldn't love me*" has no grounds. We are loved dearly. There is no condemnation, only healing. Christ will shine on us. We can be honest with ourselves. We can be honest with God. We can be honest with the trustworthy people in our lives. We can have the courage to see ourselves as we truly are in all our both/and-ness: in all our beauty and our brokenness. This is the spiritual practice called *confession*. Confession is not meant to bring shame; it is meant to free us from it.

Even more, it's meant to free our communities from shame, too. Did you notice how Paul said that everything that is illuminated actually becomes a light itself? The very things we're ashamed of, the very things we feel disqualify us, the weaknesses and struggles and vulnerabilities we carry are not liabilities, they are our greatest asset. As we bring them into the light, they *become light* for others.

What if the church was a little more like that? What if our strength was not our perfection, but our courage to, in Christ, renounce the shame that keeps us trying harder and frees us to humbly participate in the transformation God has for us?

Ephesians scholar, Timothy Gombis (who John is going to interview at the end of this series) puts it this way:

"The way of promise is to become communities of humility, communities that confess our brokenness and failings without caring to point out those of others. We are the ones who need transformation so that we can become cultures that bless and transform others. It is only through the cultivation of cruciformity and weakness that we harness and radiate the resurrection power of God."

—Timothy Gombis, *The Drama of Ephesians*

So, our first practice. Do you remember what it was? **Be honest.** Let Christ shine on you. We are dearly loved. We can step into the light; we can acknowledge our vulnerabilities without fear.

Practice 2: Be Open-minded

There's this fascinating story in the gospel of John, where the religious leaders have gathered around Jesus, trying to condemn a woman who had had sex with someone she wasn't married to. After Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of this group of leaders, some of them hang around to hear what He has to say. Jesus teaches for a bit and John tells us that some of them were actually starting to believe what He was saying. Jesus turns to those early adopters and says that if they get what He's teaching, if they really live it out, they will *know the truth and the truth will set them free*. Here's the thing: hadn't these men spent their whole lives devoted to knowing God's truth? This ought to inspire some serious humility in us.

Being open-minded is our second practice in transformation, because sometimes, we have become so formed by our culture, our surroundings, our normal—religious or not—that we can't see or receive the truth meant to set us free. Jesus goes on to say:

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. —John 8:43-45 ESV

Remember when Sari and I were in the Ape Caves? Had we lasted even 20 minutes in the darkness, our eyes would have become up to 1 million times more sensitive to the light. When our eyes have become adjusted to the darkness, the light, the truth, can be too bright to bear.

Remember that Ephesians is considered by many scholars to be an apocalyptic letter: a text that is revelatory in nature—it reveals what is beyond our natural, our normal; it reveals what is beyond our culture, our time and space. **A trademark of apocalyptic literature is that it calls upon the reader to be discerning.** There is more than meets the eye. Apocalyptic literature calls us to be open-minded in our understanding of what is real and true.

To be open-minded is to practice discernment. To not just accept things the way they are, as the way they seem, but to pursue truth. To interrogate assumptions. To ask questions. To expect revelation.

Verses 8-10: *“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.”*

Notice Paul doesn't say, live as a **child** of the light. He says, live as **children** of the light. Discernment of goodness, righteousness, and truth is meant to be the function of community. Together, in humility, we find out what pleases the Lord, what brings delight to our Creator. Together, we are open-minded to the truth. Together, we identify the lies and let the truth revealed begin to resonate and have real-estate in our lives.

In my conversation with David McKinnon, he said, *“We live in a failed world. The darkness is always trying to make me believe that I am unloved. I have to not believe the liar. I have to stay in the light.”*

As we participate in our transformation, as we live as children of light, we must practice being open-minded.

For years I had Psalm 43 written along the top of my bedroom wall. It's my go-to prayer when I feel lost, confused, afraid, or stuck. When I'm searching God's heart on a matter.

Send out your light and your truth, let them lead me;

let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.

Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.

I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. —Psalm 43:3-4

Send out your light and your truth, God. Let them lead us. Be open-minded to the truth.

Practice 3: Be Willing

What's the difference between *willpower* and *being willing*? Isn't being willing just another form of trying harder? No—there's a big difference. Willpower is self-effort. It's striving. It's force. To practice being willing, however, is to open my hands, to open my heart in a posture of surrender. It's opening ourselves to grace. It's saying "yes" to God's life at work in us.

To be willing means we keep showing up. It means we take action in our own transformation. It might involve doing things I love and it might involve doing things that I don't love. It might involve doing things that are inconvenient, that stretch me, that might be uncomfortable.

One of the questions I asked David last week was, "*How do you understand God's grace?*" He was like, "*Oooo, that's a tough one!*" I wasn't sure I could answer it myself. But I loved the conversation that transpired. He said,

"Grace is so easy to understand when it's good things. It's harder to understand or receive when it's the inconvenient stuff, or the painful stuff, or the angering stuff, or the costly stuff. But inconvenient and uncomfortable moments allow us to align with God's will, God's heart and God's ways. That's grace. To turn my thoughts, my actions, and my emotions over to the care of God each and every day, in each and every circumstance."

When the traffic is bad and I want to yell at the car next to me, that's a moment for grace.

When the kids are having a meltdown—again— and I'm at the end of my rope, that's a moment for grace.

When I'm burned out and over-committed and don't know how to find a better way, that's a moment for grace.

When I lose something or someone I love and I don't know how I'm going to be okay, that's a moment for grace.

When the diagnosis isn't good and despair starts creeping in, that's a moment for grace.

It's these moments, when we're hard pressed, when we're scared, when we're numb, when we feel alone or at the end of our rope: **these are the moments of our transformation.** Not **will we**, in our own strength, choose the better path, but **will we be willing** to turn our thoughts, our actions, and our emotions over to the care of God and take our next best step. This is the call of discipleship.

Verses 1-2: Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Jesus struggled with this path, too. He didn't deny the pain of choosing the cross *and* He didn't white-knuckle His way through. He went to the garden where He regularly prayed, He asked His friends to companion Him, and He struggled with the Father. He turned His thoughts, His actions, and His emotions over to the care of God, and then He took His next best step. **He showed us how to be willing, even in the most devastating circumstances.** And He will show us how to be willing, how to surrender ourselves to the care of God in whatever we're facing today, tomorrow, and always.

Practice #3: Be willing. Open your life to the grace of God. Paul knows this from experience. He begged God to rid his life of his "*thorn in the flesh,*" but Jesus said that He had something better for him than just removing it. It was through Paul's weakness, through his vulnerability, that God's grace and strength could flow. "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" **Be willing to let God's grace flow in and through you.**

Closing:

We can read passages like the one from Ephesians today and feel inadequate or defensive. We're keenly aware of our inability to measure up to the call of following Jesus in our own strength. We don't have to try harder. Instead, we can participate in our own genuine transformation: Be honest. Be open-minded. Be willing. Christ will shine on you.

Communion:

The same night that Jesus shared communion with His disciples, He also gave a bit of a farewell speech. He knew the cross lay before Him and wanted to prepare His friends. He said a lot of significant things that night. He challenged them, encouraged them, loved them. **But He also told them to not try and do any of this Kingdom stuff apart from Him. He told them that their work fundamentally was to abide in Him, to make their home in His love.** That's where it all begins. And that same invitation is here for us today.

On the night He was betrayed, He took the bread and after giving thanks He broke it, saying, "*This is my body broken for you. Eat in remembrance of me.*" And then He took the cup and said, "*This is my blood shed for you, the sign of the new covenant. Drink in remembrance of me.*" You can participate in communion when you're ready.

Benediction:

Let's go with these words from pastor and Message Bible author Eugene Peterson:

"We are not adequate to live a life of love out of our own will or resources. Trying harder doesn't do it. Enter the Spirit. God provides God's Spirit to live the life of God in us, and we are reoriented around the center that holds."

Go in peace, New Hope.