

## "LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS"

### I. Introduction

- A. This is one of several New Testament passages in which Christians are described as lights shining forth in this sin-darkened world.
1. In our culture, the same kind of imagery is used to describe those who enjoy outsized influence and are widely revered.
  2. I am speaking of the people are often referred to as "stars."
  3. They are also known as celebrities, a concept that one writer has aptly described as a matter of being famous for being famous.
- B. The contemporary conception of "stardom" stands in sharp contrast to the way Christians shine light into our dark world.
1. You don't have to be famous to be the kind of light-bearer that Paul is talking about in these verses.
  2. You don't have to have extraordinary talent or good looks or a million followers on social media.
  3. You simply have to be someone who is united to Jesus Christ.
  4. He is light in himself, and is therefore the supreme light of the world.
  5. As we study this passage this evening, we will consider what it teaches us about our identity and function as lights in the world.

### II. The Nature of Our Light (14-15)

- A. Our passage begins with Paul instructing us to “Do all things without grumbling or disputing.”
1. The words “all things” summarize all the duty to which God calls us.
  2. That is, this phrase refers to the working out of our salvation that Paul mentioned in verse 12.
  3. As we work out our salvation, we are to renounce grumbling and disputing.
  4. These words bring to mind Israel’s wilderness generation, whose rebellion against the Lord was characterized by grumbling and disputing.
  5. The connection with that low point in Israel’s history is further underscored by Paul’s use of the phrase “crooked and twisted generation” in verse 15.
  6. Moses used the same phrase in Deuteronomy 32 to describe the wilderness generation because of how they had rebelled against the Lord. (v. 5)
  7. It is not very hard to see why they would be described this way.
  8. The Lord worked a great deliverance for the Israelites, miraculously bringing them through the Red Sea.
  9. But they quickly showed their ingratitude by their complaining and their questioning.
  10. By alluding back to that generation, Paul is warning us not to commit the same sin that the Israelites committed.
  11. After all, the Lord has worked an even greater deliverance for us, setting us free from sin and judgment.

12. If we were to give ourselves over to a complaining and contentious spirit, we would show ourselves to be crooked and twisted.
- B. If you commit yourself to doing all things without grumbling or disputing, you will stand out in comparison to the rest of the world.
1. Just think of how much complaining and arguing you hear in a given day.
  2. Think of how the people around you respond when things do not go their way.
  3. Think of how they deal with their disappointments and disagreements and sources of anxiety.
  4. The Lord doesn't want you to live like that.
  5. Such behavior is out of keeping with your identity as a child of God.
  6. When Paul uses the phrase "children of God," he is speaking exclusively of Christians.
  7. Non-Christians are not children of God.
  8. Certainly, all people are made in God's image, but in our fallen condition we are children of wrath, as Paul points out in Ephesians 2.
  9. Praise God that, through Christ, we are adopted as God's children.
  10. And if you are his child, God wants you to trust him in the face of life's uncertainties, disappointments, and conflicts.
  11. When you do that, when you refuse to join the world's chorus of grumbling and arguing and questioning, you will shine the light of God's new creation into this world.

- C. The next thing that Paul says is that we are to “be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish.”
1. Of course, no one can be perfect, not even after conversion.
  2. But this is the sort of language that is used throughout Scripture to describe faithful believers.
  3. Moses tells us that Noah stood out as “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” (Gen. 6:9).
  4. God himself commended Job as “a blameless and upright man” (Job 1:8).
  5. And Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, walked “blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (Lk. 1:6).
  6. These examples show us that the Bible sees holiness as a real possibility for God’s people.
  7. The Bible does not equate the holiness of believers with perfection.
  8. None of the individuals mentioned above were perfect, and yet God’s Word describes them as blameless.
  9. John Calvin explains why the Bible speaks this way by noting that “After forgiveness of sins is set forth, the good works that follow are appraised otherwise than on their own merit. For everything imperfect in them is covered by Christ’s perfection, every blemish or spot is cleansed away by his purity in order not to be brought into question at the divine judgment.” [*Institutes*, 3.17.8]
  10. The Bible is not asking the impossible of us when it calls us to live a blameless life.
  11. You can be holy, and you need to make it your goal to be as holy as you can possibly be.

12. You should strive to be above reproach before others, and to have a clear conscience in yourself.
- D. As Paul points out, this will make a Christian's life stand in sharp contrast to the lives of the non-Christians around him.
1. The fact that we are living "in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation" is something that we are reminded of all the time.
  2. We live in a world that is marked by immorality, immodesty, unkindness, profanity, disrespect, and decadence.
  3. There is not much you can do to change that.
  4. But you are not to participate in that way of life.
  5. You are called to live as one who is set apart.
  6. Your upright conduct should distinguish you from the people of this evil age.
- E. We should remember that we are not the first Christians to live amid a significant degree of godlessness and degeneracy.
1. Christians of earlier eras lived in highly immoral cultures.
  2. Yet they were able to live godly and upright lives.
  3. We find one good example of this in a passage from the Letter to Diognetus, a work of Christian apologetics from the second century A.D.
  4. The author of this letter writes, "For Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of the human race by country or language or customs. They do not live in cities of their own; they do not use a peculiar form of speech; they do not follow an eccentric manner of life... Yet... they give proof of the remarkable

and admittedly extraordinary constitution of their own commonwealth... They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring [a reference to the pagan practice of exposing unwanted children]. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed... They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require." [5.1-10]

5. The early Christians lived alongside people who left their unwanted babies to die at the town dump.
6. They lived among people who did not value marital fidelity and sexual purity.
7. Yet they distinguished themselves by living by a different standard.
8. So should you.
9. You are a child of God.
10. This should be evident by how you conduct yourself in this twisted generation.
11. You are a shining light in the world.
12. Let your light shine forth, even though many around you love the darkness rather than the light because their works are evil.

### III. The Source and Goal of Our Light (16-18)

- A. This brings us to verse 16, where Paul speaks of the source of the Christian's new life, "the word of life."
  1. This is a reference to the gospel, which is the instrument through which the new life is communicated to us.

2. This reminds us that the reason why Christians shine as light in the world is not because of any light that is inherent in us.
  3. The gospel is the source of our light, our new life in Christ.
  4. God's Word alone has the power to give spiritual life.
  5. We see this in an interaction between Jesus and his disciples in John 6.
  6. When Jesus said, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life," Peter responded by saying, "You have the words of eternal life." (Jn. 6:63, 68)
  7. Peter never stopped believing that.
  8. He would later tell the Christians to whom he wrote his first epistle, "you have been born again... through the living and abiding word of God... And this word is the good news that was preached to you." (1 Pet. 1:23, 25)
  9. We are born again by God's word because it is the living word.
  10. And we are sustained in our faith through this same word because it is the abiding word.
- B. Because the gospel is the source of our new life in Christ, it is not something that we only need to hear once.
1. On the contrary, we need to hold fast to this word all our days.
  2. Don't ever get tired of hearing and cherishing and meditating upon the gospel of Jesus Christ.
  3. You need to hear the message of the good news again and again and again.

4. You need to come to worship each Lord's Day, ideally twice, to hear it proclaimed.
  5. You need to preach it to yourself each and every day.
  6. As Michael Horton reminds us, "The gospel is a surprising announcement that none of us had a right to expect. As such, it has to be told — again and again." [*Christless Christianity*, 131]
- C. Paul continues in our text by reminding us that the goal or purpose of our shining as lights in the world is connected with the day of Christ's return.
1. We need to function as a source of light in this present evil age so that we can be ready to stand before Christ on that great day.
  2. The purpose of Paul's ministry as an apostle was so that believers like the Philippians might be shown to be faithful on the last day.
  3. Paul did not want his labor to be in vain.
  4. He wanted it to produce good fruit.
- D. Paul gives a description of what such fruitfulness looks like by likening the life of faith to a sacrificial offering.
1. He writes, "Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all."
  2. Remember, Paul wrote those words from prison, facing the possibility of being put to death for the sake of Christ.
  3. He wants the Philippians to know that he will be happy to make that sacrifice if they will offer up their lives as a sacrifice for Christ.
  4. In saying this, Paul is likening the Christian life to the Old Testament thank offerings, and he is likening his possible martyrdom to the drink offerings that were sometimes added to



those sacrifices.

5. The thank offerings were symbolic of the joyful and willing covenantal obedience that God has always desired from his human creatures.
  6. He made us so that we would offer ourselves up to him in grateful service and worship.
  7. And in Christ he sets his children free from slavery to sin so that we can be what human beings were meant to be.
  8. He redeemed us so that we would gratefully offer our lives to him.
  9. As one theologian explains, in Christ, God has bound us to himself in such a way that we are “liberated from all other bonds and set free to live in the truth.” [John Webster, *Holiness*, 93]
- E. The language of sacrifice reminds us that self-denial is a key component of the Christian life.
1. You are not your own.
  2. You belong to Jesus.
  3. And just as Jesus himself prayed to the Father saying, “not as I will, but as you will”, he calls you to live with that same prayer on your lips.
  4. As the Heidelberg Catechism explains in its summary of what is required in the first commandment, God calls us to “give up anything rather than go against his will in any way.” [Q/A. 94]

#### IV. Conclusion

- A. As we said earlier, no Christian lives a perfect life.

- B. But many believers do live blameless lives in the sense that Paul means in this passage.
- C. Yes, there will always be sin in your life, right up until the day when you are with Christ in glory.
- D. But you need to remind yourself, each and every day, that sin is no longer your master.
- E. As Paul points out in Romans 6, if in Christ you died to sin, how then can you still live in it?
- F. Every sin that you commit is an anomaly.
- G. It is something that is inconsistent with the glorious new identity you have been given in Jesus Christ.
- H. You used to belong to the darkness that engulfs this world.
- I. But now, now you are light in the Lord.
- J. Walk, therefore, as children of light. (see Eph. 5:8).