

Introduction

Most of you know I'm not a big fan of television or movies. The truth is most TV shows and most movies just aren't interesting to me. I am fascinated, however, by the very idea of acting. Two common techniques for acting are "method acting" and "technical acting". Technical acting is the sort we think of with traditional theater. An actor studies his or her script and strives for precise control over voice and movement, so as to enhance the believability of the actor's portrayal of the character. With technical acting the actor *creates* the character.

Method acting is quite different. In this technique the actor does not seek to *create* the character. Rather, a method actor seeks to *become* the character. Daniel Day Lewis is perhaps one of the best known for this technique.

In his role in the 1989 movie "My Left Foot", Daniel *became* his character. It is the true story of a man with severe cerebral palsy who wrote and painted with his left foot. To become his character, Daniel learned to paint with his left foot. He famously remained in a wheelchair even when not filming and went so far as to have the crew feed him since his character was unable to feed himself.

In 2002 he played the role of Bill the Butcher in the movie "Gangs of New York". Because of his insistence on wearing only clothing appropriate for 1846—the setting of the movie—even when not on set, Daniel became stricken with pneumonia for not being properly clothed when the movie was filmed in the winter. This is commitment to his craft!

Because he becomes so immersed in his characters, he has often had counseling to help him recognize who the true Daniel Day Lewis is. After months and even years researching his roles and then adopting the voice and mannerisms—and physical conditions—of his characters, he *becomes* the character and often needs help returning to his true self. He becomes so entrenched in playing a role that he forgets who the true Daniel Day Lewis is.

In 2017 he quit acting due to the toll method acting placed on his physical and emotional health. Though he had a profound ability to act, it was all just an act. Today he lives a very private life in which few from the outside have any idea what he is up to.

The truth is many Christians are confused what it means to follow Christ. For some, they are technical actors, trying to *create* a character. They practice their lines over and over again, that they might say the right thing at the right time and thus appear to be the character they are portraying. They focus on engaging in the physical movements that enhance the illusion of the character they have created.

Others take a more comprehensive approach like Daniel Day Lewis. They *method act* the Christian faith, immersing themselves in their roles such that they think they become their characters. They find themselves exhausted, however, for while they immerse themselves fully in their characters, the cognitive dissonance they experience wears them out.

We often treat following Jesus like assuming a role in which we pretend to be something we're not. We have to *act* holy because we're not really holy. We have to engage in righteous

behavior, because inside we're not really all that righteous. In our text today we will see there's a better way. We do not need to act the part. We do not need to *become* the part. Following Jesus is about being reminded who we truly are so that we no longer play a part but are our true selves. It is when we engage in attitudes and behaviors that do not match our true selves—who we are in Christ—that we become mere actors. Following Jesus isn't about acting, but about being. We're in Ephesians 5.

Eph 5:6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not become partners with them; ⁸ for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Ephesians 5:6–14

Empty Words

When we focus on a text for preaching—the technical term is “pericope”, an extract from a larger text—we necessarily lose some of the context. Ephesians is a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus and was intended to be read to them. You don't normally read a letter a paragraph at a time; you read it straight through. You may later refer back to it, but a letter should be read in one sitting. It is clear Paul understood he was writing holy Scripture as he expected the letter to be read and re-read by the Ephesians and others.

Part of what we do each week is set the context for that particular pericope. Doing so helps us understand exactly what Paul is saying. If we read this straight through, some of these connections would be more obvious. If we could read it in its original language with no need for explanation of words, we would understand the connections even more.

With that in mind, Paul begins by saying to let no one deceive you with empty words. What are these empty words? It is significant that we understand what these empty words are for the warning he gives: it is because of *these things* the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. What are these things? If we answer that we answer what the empty words are.

What is the context? In verse 3 Paul tells them sexual immorality and impurity and covetousness must not be named among them. That is, these must not be behaviors or attitudes or pursued desires that describe them. There must be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking among them. Why? “For because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience”.

“These things” refers to, well, *these things*. God's wrath comes upon the sons of disobedience for sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk, and crude

joking. This is the context of “empty words”. What are the empty words that some would speak? New Testament scholar Constantine Campbell explains it this way:

The opening phrase of 5:6 reveals a concern about downplaying the vices listed in 5:3–4: “Let no one deceive you with empty arguments.” Paul implies that some may try to convince others that such sins are not serious but, he says, they are serious enough to warrant the wrath of God.

Constantine R. Campbell, Pillar NTC

Some will claim the sins Paul lists as characteristics that must not be named are not all that serious. “It’s no big deal; it’s just a video on the screen. It’s not like you’re *actually* cheating on her.” “Love is love.” “C’mon, it’s *just a joke*.” Maybe, *but God isn’t laughing*.

In the first century Jewish Christians would have understood the danger of sexual immorality. They were less likely to have indulged in the same sort of sexual immorality Gentile Christians would have engaged in. The real difference, due to culture, is Jewish Christians were simply less likely to act out their desires whereas Gentile Christians came from a culture in which there were very few restrictions on sexual behavior.

It would have been very difficult for those who were saved out of that sort of immorality to embrace their new life in Christ. The last thing new Christians who were striving for holiness needed was someone telling them their sin was no big deal. “Go ahead and embrace your true self.”

Notice carefully Paul’s encouragement to avoid those who would deceive with empty words: the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. When you hear “wrath” don’t think uncontrolled rage, as if God has a vein popping out from his forehead and is spitting and shaking with anger. Paul means God’s just and righteous judgment is coming, and it’s coming for “the sons of disobedience”. I want you to see the motivation here isn’t to avoid God’s wrath! If we read this letter straight through we’d recognize this phrase. Back in chapter 2 Paul reminds them of their former life.

Eph 2:1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience...

Ephesians 2:1–2

The Ephesian believers were once sons of disobedience! Paul himself was once a son of disobedience! Do you see the motivation? It isn’t focused on the wrath! The church in Ephesus should not allow people to deceive them with empty words, words that claim their former sins are not that big a deal, and the reason they should not allow this is because God’s wrath, his righteous judgment for sin, comes upon the sons of disobedience and—listen closely—*they are no longer sons of disobedience!* Their fundamental identity has changed! They have been transformed! God’s wrath is coming, but not for them so they should not let people deceive them about what they’ve been saved from.

If they were to believe the empty words that seek to deceive, they would begin acting in a manner that is contrary to their true nature. They are no longer sons of disobedience for God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

Walk As Children of Light

Because their identity has been changed, because they are now united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, because Christ's righteousness is now their righteousness, they must not become partners with them. Who are they? They are those who speak empty words, whether they are in the church or outside the church. Whomever speaks empty words that downplay the seriousness of sin, the Ephesians must not become partners with them. They must not become sharers with them. The word "partner" implies "intimate communion" with them.

Because their identity has changed, they have nothing in common with those who speak empty words. Therefore it makes no sense to have intimate communion with them. He refers to this change in identity again in verse 8: "for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord".

Words matter. He does *not* say, "For you were *in* darkness". He says, "For you *were* darkness". Prior to their salvation in Christ, they were darkness. Their fundamental identity was darkness. As he put it in chapter 2, at one time they were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise. They were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. But God in Christ rescued them. He saved them. He united them with Christ and changed their fundamental identity.

Now in the church there is neither Jew nor Gentile for Christ has taken from both groups and is actively creating a new humanity. Though they once were darkness, they are now light in the Lord. You cannot have a more significant change in identity than this: darkness is now light. They are no longer what they once were. They are no longer who they once were. They now belong to the Lord and are children of light.

Think of what a child is: the offspring of parents. To be children of light is to be offspring of light.

Jn 8:12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12

To be children of light is to be the Lord's beloved children. Paul says they are to walk as children of light. That is, they are to reflect the Lord's light. Whereas they once walked in trespasses and sins—being darkness—now they must walk in a manner that reflects their true identity in Christ. Since Christ is the light of the world, their lives must reflect that light.

He says in verse 9 the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true. Fruit is the natural outworking of being a thing. An apple tree doesn't *try* to bear apples; it simply produces apples *because this is the nature of an apple tree*. Apple trees produce apples because of what they *are*, not because of what they try to be. Paul says the Ephesians *are* children of light. Being children of light the natural fruit of their identity is that which is good and right and true.

They are to try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Again, pay attention to the context. They must not let anyone deceive them with empty words that minimize sin. Because they are children of light, they must live in accord with this fundamental identity,

the fruit of which is all that is good and right and true. As they strive to discern what is pleasing to the Lord, they will recognize that sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking are not among the things that please him.

Instead of these things, the natural fruit of being children of light are all the things that are good and right and true. The great African theologian Augustine put it this way in the fourth century:

Once for all, then, a short precept is given you: Love, and do what you will: whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace; whether you cry out, through love cry out; whether you correct, through love correct; whether you spare, through love do you spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good.

Augustine, Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Homily VII.8

Love, and do what you want. If you truly love God, you will begin to love what God loves. If you truly love God, you will begin to hate what God hates. If you truly love your neighbor, you will not steal from him or harm him or sleep with his wife or bear false witness against him. If you love your desires will be shaped by this love and your behavior will adjust accordingly. When this happens you will do what you want to do, and what you will want to do is all that is good and right and true. This is the fruit of light!

When Paul tells them to walk as children of light, he means to live out their true identity. Do what comes naturally to your new identity in Christ. Put off the old self, as he says in verse 22, and put on your new self. Remember, this new self “is created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”. Walk this way!

Be Exposed

In verse 11 he tells them to take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness. Just as they are light and the fruit of light is all that is good and right and true, so the fruit of darkness are the things he mentioned earlier: sexual immorality and impurity and covetousness and filthiness and foolish talk and crude joking. Don't participate in this!

Apples trees only produce apples because it is in their nature to produce apples. They do not produce pears! However! They can be made to produce pears. If you graft in branches from a pear tree, those branches will tap into the sap system of the apple tree and begin to produce pears from those branches. This takes *effort*, for it is not natural. The apple tree is acting like something it is not.

It takes effort to take part in the unfruitful works of darkness. Hear me clearly: it is not natural for a child of light to take part in the unfruitful works of darkness. You have to choose to do this. Paul says don't do this! It's unnatural! That's not who you are. That's who you *were*, but you are not that person anymore, for God has adopted you into his family and has given you a new identity, and has made you light in the Lord.

Rather than take part in the unfruitful works of darkness, he says to expose them. Again, context is key to understanding this. What does it mean to expose them? For many in our world today, this means railing against certain kinds of sins in public. For many it

means to marginalize those who struggle in particular ways and to make them feel incredibly unwelcome in the local church. This is not what Paul means.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote to them about a member of the church who refused to repent of his sexual immorality—that’s key: he refused to repent. They were to excommunicate him, to remove him from their fellowship and “hand him over to Satan”. They were, essentially, declaring the man was not a believer in Jesus but was lost. Here’s what he wrote:

¹ Cor 5:9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?

1 Corinthians 5:9–12

Paul’s concern is holiness in the local church. Excommunication is reserved for those who refuse to repent, who *refuse* to walk as children of light, who demonstrate they are not truly in Christ. He is *not* concerned about those outside the church, at least in terms of judging them. To say this another way, Paul isn’t interested so much in changing the culture of the Roman empire. He’s not trying to win the empire for Jesus. He’s trying to be faithful and to ensure each local church is faithful. Rather than finger-pointing at those outside the church, he’s insisting those inside the church walk as children of light.

When he says in verse 11 to take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them, who are “they”? He doesn’t mean the focus of exposure is to be on the sin, but on the person! He specifically means those inside the church! It is shameful to talk about *the things* done in secret. What things? Context! Things like sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking! These things are done, of course, in secret—in *darkness*.

He says to expose them. In verse 13 he says when anything is exposed by the light, it become visible. When *what* is exposed by the light? You shine light in darkness. What is the darkness? They were darkness! When the light of Jesus shines on darkness, the darkness becomes light. Sin can never become light, so he must mean the people. When God’s people are acting like their old selves and the light of Jesus exposes their unfruitful works of darkness, the person becomes visible! He says when anything—the person!—is exposed by the light, it—the person!—becomes visible, and anything—the person!—that becomes visible becomes light! That is, the person begins walking as a child of light. “Expose them” has nothing to do with shaming people or running them out of the church!

He then cites what many scholars believe to be an early Christian hymn: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you”. Here we see clearly what the light is: it is Jesus. Jesus is the one who shines into the darkness. Jesus is the one whose light we *reflect*. This is the imagery John uses in Revelation to refer to the church. He calls the local church a lampstand. The church holds forth the light, but the lampstand is not the light. Christ is the light.

When Christ shines on us we cannot help but reflect him. This is our nature. It is our identity. We are his beloved children, and so we must walk as children of light. To walk as children of light is to bear the fruit of light, all that is good and right and true. This is what pleases the Lord. This is why we must not take part in the unfruitful works of darkness. Christ shines on us, and we reflect him to others!

Sanctification

What we're seeing in this text, and throughout this letter, is Paul's emphasis on sanctification. Sanctification is the process by which God causes our lived behavior to match our status before him. God declares we are righteous, then by his Spirit he begins working in us to make us actually righteous. God declares we are holy, then by his Spirit he begins working in us to make us actually holy. This is our sanctification. Clinton Arnold explains it well.

As believers grow in Christ, the process of renewal and taking off the old self involves eliminating lifestyles and behaviors that were typical of their pre-Christian lives but are shameful and inappropriate for their new life in Christ. Paul calls believers to help the less mature members of the community by exposing their evil deeds to the light so they can reflect their new and true nature as children of light.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

I love how he says they must “reflect their new and true nature as children of light”. One author points out that Paul takes conversion much more seriously than we, for he does not say they are “part light and part darkness”. He says they *are* light. As Dan shared last week, he calls them *saints*. They *are* holy people. They *are* a transformed people—not a people waiting to be transformed. They *are* light.

Paul indicates there has been a clear break in identity. They are no longer who they once were but are now something different. He has explained this in various ways. They have been adopted as sons of God, as those who will inherit all that belongs to the Father. Though they were dead in their sins God has made them alive together with Christ. Remember what he says in chapter 4. They are to:

Eph 4:24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:24

Do you hear the clear break in identity? You were the old self. Now you are the new self. You were darkness. Now you are light. You were sons of disobedience. Now you are beloved children of God. You are, right now, *created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*. Stop pretending to be the old you and be the new you! Sanctification is not the process of *becoming* something new. It is the process of recognizing that you are already something new and so you must be engaged in putting off the old you and putting on the new you.

Hear me clearly: the work of sanctification is the work of allowing who we are in Christ to properly reflect the light of Jesus. It is not the work of *becoming something*. We are already children of light; Paul tells us to walk as children of light. If we were apple trees he would tell us to allow the apples to grow and to stop grafting in pear branches. We must stop *actively preventing* the apples from growing. What we are will produce the fruit of light in all that is good and right and true. We interfere with this natural process of producing this fruit by actively trying to graft in branches from our old trees.

I mentioned that in verse 14 Paul cites what scholars believe to be an early Christian hymn. After telling them that anything exposed by the light becomes visible and anything that becomes visible *is light*, he cites the hymn. Therefore it says, “Awake O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you”. It is so important that we remember what the light is. Christ is the one who shines on us, for Christ is the center of our faith.

When Paul tells them to expose them, he is not referring to those outside the church but those inside the church. He’s telling them to care for one another in the church by exposing the darkness some participate in with the end result being they become light. Or perhaps we could say so they better reflect the light. It is Christ who shines on us and causes us to be light.

Jesus is the center of our faith. It is not the Bible. The Bible is the inspired word of God and is authoritative for faith and practice. It is not the center of our faith. Jesus is the center of our faith. This is an essential point for our sanctification: *truth* is not the center of our faith, Jesus is. Jesus is the truth so in a sense “truth” is the center of our faith but we must be cautious because it is far too easy to make theological precision the center of our faith. Theological precision does not result in holiness. Becoming like Jesus results in holiness. *Christ* must shine on you, which means we expose the darkness by proclaiming *Christ* to one another.

Application

Here’s what it comes down to: we do not need to try to pretend to be something we are not for we often already pretend to be what we are not. We tend to pretend we are the old us. You sometimes try to act like the old you and I sometimes try to act like the old me. Whether we pursue this through technical acting by practicing really, really hard, or we pursue this through method acting by immersing ourselves in our old character, we find this exhausting. It will never get us what we are truly seeking. This is why Paul says we must put off the old self and we must put on the new. We need to be reminded who we are, that we might walk as children of light.

Remember the context. In 4:25 he says we have put away falsehood. What falsehood? The falsehood of walking as Gentiles walk, for you are no longer Gentiles! Your fundamental identity has changed. I’m reminded of Corinne’s story about her bumper stickers. She had some on her car that were explicit. One day she was pumping gas and noticed those bumper stickers. She realized they do not really represent *who she is* so she and Jessie simply peeled them off. No one pointed fingers at her and shamed her. No one accused her of being a bad Christian. No one threw darkness upon that darkness. She *remembered* who she is in Christ and simply allowed her apple tree to bear apples.

Though the Ephesians were Gentiles, the moment the Lord Jesus saved them they were changed. They became new. Now they must remember they are new and their behavior will adjust accordingly.

Pay attention to Paul's words to the Colossians. Notice all that Paul says God *has done*—already accomplished.

Col 1:9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:9–14

Your citizenship and my citizenship has been transferred. We no longer belong to the old domain of darkness. We are now members of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus. We *have been qualified* to share in this inheritance of the saints in light. This is who we are. When we act and think in a different manner, we are acting a part, pretending to be something we're not. That something happens to be what we once were, but in Christ we are longer darkness. Now we are children of light. We must walk as children of light.