

Session 4 • The Unfruitful Works of Darkness

Ephesians 5:3-14; John 3:19-21

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers why Paul calls the works of darkness unfruitful: darkness is sterile by nature, produces nothing that lasts, and hides because exposure to light is its defeat. The baptized are not merely in the light; they were darkness and are now light in the Lord.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church has called baptism illumination since the earliest centuries: having received the Word, the true light, the baptized are enlightened and become sons of light (CCC 1216).

What You Need to Know

Tonight the study's title phrase arrives. Paul does not say the fruits of darkness; he says "the unfruitful works of darkness" (Ephesians 5:11). The contrast is exact and deliberate: the Spirit bears fruit (5:9, "the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true"), while darkness manufactures works, and sterile ones. Read this way, sin produces effects, wreckage, consequences, but nothing worth calling fruit: nothing alive, nothing that feeds others or carries seed. Keep the target precise: Paul condemns the works of darkness, not works as a category; God prepared good works for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10), and bearing fruit and doing good works belong together (Colossians 1:10). This is the session's reading of Paul's deliberate contrast, and it is the hinge between the study's first movement and its third.

Ephesians 5:8 makes a claim stronger than metaphor usually allows: not "you were in darkness" but "you were darkness," and now you are light in the Lord. Conversion is not relocation but transformation. The imperative follows the indicative: become what you are, "walk as children of light."

John 3:19-21 supplies the psychology: the light has come, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil; the one who does evil hates the light lest his deeds be exposed. Darkness is not merely ignorance awaiting information. It is a preference, defended by hiding. This is why "expose" (Ephesians 5:11) is a work of love: light does not humiliate the sick, it heals what hiding was killing.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The Bible's third sentence is "Let there be light," and God's first recorded evaluation ends in a separation: God saw that the light was good, and separated the light from the darkness (Genesis 1:3-4). Darkness is never granted equal standing; it is what light pushes back.

Isaiah promises the great reversal: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2), a text the Gospels apply to Christ. And the Servant is appointed "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). When Jesus says "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), he claims Isaiah's promise as his own job description.

Voices of the Church

St. Justin Martyr

First Apology 61 (summary)

Describing baptism to the Roman emperor around the year 155, St. Justin reports that the washing is called illumination, because those who learn these things are illuminated in their understanding. Within a century of the apostles, the Church's own name for baptism was Paul's theology of Ephesians 5:8 compressed into one word.

St. Ambrose

On the Mysteries 2.7 (summary)

Leading the newly baptized through what happened to them at the font, St. Ambrose piles up the light imagery of the rite: those preparing for baptism turned physically from west to east, renouncing darkness to face the rising sun, and the newly baptized were clothed in white. The Church's liturgy keeps the family resemblance: at the Easter Vigil the faithful's candles are lit from the one Paschal candle.

St. John Henry Newman

The Pillar of the Cloud, "Lead, Kindly Light" (summary)

Becalmed and sick at sea in 1833, long before his entry into the Catholic Church, Newman wrote the hymn that begins "Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom." He asked for one step's worth of light at a time. His witness matters for the group member who feels more gloom than glory: walking as children of light often means following a light that shows the next step, not the whole road.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1216 gathers the tradition: baptism is called enlightenment, and the baptized, having received the Light, are themselves light, sons of light.

CCC 1695 addresses the baptized in Paul's own register: sanctified and called to be saints, Christians are to walk as children of light, in goodness, righteousness, and truth.

CCC 2466 connects light to truth: in Jesus the divine truth was fully manifest; his disciples are to walk in the light and are set free by the truth. Hiding and darkness travel together; so do light and honesty.

Thread Watch

Threads in play

Darkness-to-light (developed tonight). The half-verse from last session gets its second half tonight: "once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." Do not resolve the thread; the question the group should leave holding is what are children of light for? The answer, being sent into the night, waits for Session 12.

Vine. The fruit/works contrast tonight sets the table for the fruit movement. If anyone asks what the fruit of light consists of, have the group reread Ephesians 5:9 and identify the qualities Paul names there; explain that the coming sessions explore the fruit of the Spirit in greater depth.

Session Goals

1. Have the group discover the works/fruit word contrast in Ephesians 5 themselves.
2. Establish that darkness is sterile and hides, from John 3:19-21.
3. Recover baptism-as-illumination through Justin and the liturgy.
4. Complete the Ephesians 5:8 quotation and develop the darkness thread.

Time Note

Runs 75-85 minutes. If short, cut Build question 5 (Genesis separation cross-check) and compress the Ambrose voice into the liturgy discussion.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit. You hovered over the darkness at creation and light answered. Hover over every darkness in us tonight, and let us not hide from the light that heals. Amen.

Win · Opening Questions

1. What makes it easier for someone to admit a mistake to a trustworthy person? What makes it harder?
2. Why do you think bad habits grow best in secrecy?

Build · Into the Text

Read Ephesians 5:3-14 aloud. Ask the group to listen for two contrasting nouns Paul attaches to darkness and to light.

1. Verse 9 speaks of the fruit of light; verse 11 of the unfruitful works of darkness. Compare the actions associated with darkness in 5:3-12 with the goodness, righteousness, and truth of verse 9. How do these two ways of living affect the people around us?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The works of darkness damage and use the people around them: they feed on secrecy and leave wreckage behind. The fruit of light, all that is good and right and true, feeds the people near it. That is why Paul calls the dark works unfruitful: they do not lead toward holiness or eternal life. He is not condemning good works, for God prepared good works for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10), and Scripture joins bearing fruit to every good work (Colossians 1:10). Darkness, on Paul's showing, is sterile: the old tradition that evil builds nothing of its own, only corrupting what is good, stands behind the word he chose.

2. Read Ephesians 5:8 slowly. Paul does not say you were in darkness. What does he say, and what difference does the stronger wording make?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." Not relocation but transformation: God truly changes us by grace, forgiving our sins and giving us new life in Christ, not merely improving our surroundings. The command that follows, "walk as children of light," is therefore not a demand to become something foreign but to live out what baptism made us.

Live Discovery

Send the group to John 3, just after the famous verse 16, hunting for Jesus' own explanation of why people reject the light. They should land on 3:19-21. Read it aloud and ask them to name the verb that describes darkness's survival strategy. The answer is hiding: the evildoer avoids the light "lest his deeds should be exposed."

3. According to John 3:19-21, is the human problem primarily lack of information? What is it instead, and what does that mean for how people escape darkness?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

No. "Men loved darkness rather than light": the problem is a loved preference, defended by concealment. Information alone does not cure a love. Escape comes when someone "does what is true" and comes to the light, and John immediately adds that such deeds have been "wrought in God": grace is already at work in the very coming. Honesty, examination of conscience, and confession are not self-rescue; they are cooperation with the light that draws us.

4. Ephesians 5:11 commands us to expose the works of darkness, and 5:13 says everything exposed by the light becomes visible. How is exposure an act of love rather than an act of humiliation?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Light is what darkness cannot survive, and darkness is what is killing the person hiding in it. A surgeon's lamp is not an insult to the wound. Exposure done in love aims at healing: bringing our own sins into the light of confession, and speaking truth to those we love, gently and at the right time, rather than cooperating with their hiding. Verse 14 shows the goal: "Awake, O sleeper... and Christ shall give you light." The point of exposure is resurrection, not shame. One boundary belongs in the answer: exposing another person's private sin is rarely ours to do; charity, safety, and respect for privacy can require discretion (CCC 2488-2489), and walking in the light begins with our own honesty before God.

5. Read Genesis 1:3-4. What did God do to darkness on the first day, and why does it matter that light and darkness are never treated as equal powers?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He created light, saw that it was good, and separated light from darkness. Scripture never grants darkness equal footing; it is not a rival god but an absence being pushed back. This guards the group against a hidden dualism: the fight of Sessions 2 and 3 is real, but it is not a fair fight between equals. The darkness has already lost the war; our battles are local.

Dig Deeper · The Easter Vigil in one candle

The Church begins her greatest liturgy in total darkness. One flame is struck, the Paschal candle is lit, and the deacon sings "The Light of Christ" as hundreds of small candles catch from the one. Ephesians 5 is performed before it is preached: we were darkness, light entered, and now each of the baptized carries the flame. If any group member attended a Vigil, let them describe it.

Send · Closing Questions

1. According to John 3:19-21, why might someone avoid the truth even when knowing it would help them?

2. How could you help a friend admit something wrong without embarrassing them or spreading what is private? When would a trusted adult need to be involved?

Live It This Week

- Privately examine your conscience and bring your sins honestly to God; seek sacramental Confession when needed, which nothing else replaces. If something difficult or unsafe needs help, speak with an appropriate trusted adult. You do not need to share private information with the group.
- Read John 3:16-21 each evening and end the day by asking where you walked toward light and where toward hiding.
- If you have never attended an Easter Vigil, find the date of the next one and put it on your calendar now.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, light of the world, you said that whoever follows you will not walk in darkness. Expose in us what hiding is killing, heal what your light finds, and make us children of light who are unafraid of the truth. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

Ephesians 5:8

For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage read or discussed in this session, in order of appearance, with key leader background.

- Ephesians 5:3-14
- John 3:19-21
- Ephesians 2:10 (leader background)
- Colossians 1:10 (leader background)
- Genesis 1:3-4
- Isaiah 9:2 (leader background)
- Isaiah 49:6 (leader background)
- John 8:12 (leader background)