

A Composite Picture of “Children of Light”

from Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, p 218ff

Now let us draw together the results of our studies in previous chapters to form a composite picture of “the children of light”, drawing on how they have changed in the various essential dimensions of their being. To call them *children* of light is, in biblical terminology, to say that they have the basic nature of light: that light is their parent and has passed on to them *it’s* nature, as any parent does.

Now, these people are not perfect and do not live in a perfect world – yet. But they are remarkably different. The difference is not one of a pose they strike, either from time to time or constantly, or of things they do or don’t do – though their behavior too is very different and distinctive. Where the children of light differ is primarily and most importantly on the “inside” of their life. It lies in what they are in their depths.

Thought life: Perhaps the first thing that comes to our attention when we get to know their inner life is what they think about, or what is on their mind. Simply stated, they think about God. He is never out of their mind. They love to dwell upon God and upon His greatness and loveliness, as brought to light in Jesus Christ. They adore Him in nature, in history, in His Son and in His saints. One could even say they are “God-intoxicated” (Acts 2:13, Ephesians 5:18), though no one has a stronger sense of reality and practicality than they do. Their mind is filled with biblical expressions of God’s nature, His actions, and His plans for them in His world. They do not dwell upon evil. It is not a big thing in their thoughts. They are sure of its defeat, but they still deal with it appropriately in specific situations.

Because their mind is centered upon God and oriented with reference to Him, all other good things are also welcome there: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise,” their mind ponders those things (Philippians 4:8). They are positive, realistically so, based upon the nature of God as they know it.

Feelings: And then perhaps we notice – and small wonder given what has already been observed – that the emotional life of these children of light is deeply characterized by love. That is how they invest the emotional side of their being. They love lots of good things and they love people. They love their life and who they are. They are thankful for their life – even though it may contain many difficulties, even persecution and martyrdom (Matthew 5:10-12). They receive all of it as God’s gift, or at least as His allowance, where they will know His goodness and greatness and go on to live with Him forever. And so joy and peace are with them even in the hardest of times – even when suffering unjustly. Because of what they have learned about God, they are confident and hopeful and do not indulge thoughts of rejection, failure, and hopelessness because *they know better*.

Will (spirit, heart): Looking a little deeper we find that these children of light really are devoted to doing what is good and right. Their will is habitually attuned to it, just as their minds and emotions are habitually homing in on God. They are attentive to rightness, to kindness, to helpfulness, and they are purposefully knowledgeable about life, about what people need, and about how to do what is right and good in appropriate ways.

These are people who do not think first of themselves and what they want, and they really care very little, if at all, about getting their own way. “Let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not look out for your own personal interests, but for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). These are easy and good words to them. They are abandoned to God’s will and do not struggle and deliberate as to whether they will do what they know to be wrong. They do not hesitate to do what they know to be right. It is the obvious thing to do.

Body: That, of course, involves their body. Their body has come over to the side of their will to do good. It is constantly *poised* to do what is right and good without thinking. And that also means that it does not automatically move into what is wrong, even contrary to their resolves and intentions, before they can think to *not* do it. It is no longer true of them that their “spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). They know by

experience that these words of Jesus are not a declaration about the inevitable condition of humans, but a diagnosis of a condition to be corrected. The Spirit has substantially taken over their “members”.

Consequently, we do not see them always being trapped by what their tongue, facial expressions, eyes, hands, and so on have *already* done before they can think. For their body and parts are consecrated to serve God and habituated to be His holy instruments. They instinctively avoid the paths of temptation. The bodies of these people even *look* different. There is a freshness about them, a kind of quiet strength, and a transparency. They are rested and playful in a bodily strength that is from God. He who has raised up Christ Jesus from the dead has given life to their bodies through His Spirit that dwells in them.

Social relations: In their relations to others, they are completely transparent. Because they walk in goodness they have no use for darkness, and they achieve real contact or fellowship with others – especially other apprentices of Jesus. “If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). And, “the one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause of offense in him” (1 John 2:10, Willard paraphrase). They do not conceal their thoughts and feelings (nor do they impose them upon everyone). Because of their confidence in God, they do not try to manipulate and manage others. Needless to say, in their social contexts they do not go on the attack or on the hunt, intending to use or to hurt others.

Moreover, they are completely non-condemning, while at the same time they will not participate in evil. They pay it only the attention absolutely required in any social setting, and beyond that, patient and joyful non-participation is the rule. They know how to really “be there” (wherever “there” is) without sharing in evil, as was true of Jesus himself. (Of course, as with Him, others may disapprove of their “being there”, and there are always *some* occasions where one should just step away.) But they do not reject or distance themselves from the people who may be involved in such situations. They know how to “love the sinner and hate the sin” gracefully and effectively.

Soul: Finally, as you come to know these people – though those who know only the human powers of the flesh will *never* be able to understand them (1 Corinthians 2:14) – you see that all of the above is not just at the surface. It is deep, and in a certain obvious sense, it is effortless. It *flows*. That is, the things we have been describing are not things the children of light are constantly trying hard to do, gritting their teeth and carrying on. Instead, these are features of life that well up out of a soul that is at home in God.

This is the outcome of spiritual formation in Christlikeness. Again, it does not mean perfection, but it does mean we have a person whose soul is whole: a person who, through the internalized integrity of the law of God and the administrations of the gospel and the Spirit, has a restored soul. Such a soul effectively interfaces God and the full person and enables every aspect of the self to function as God intended.