**No Butylated Hydroxytoluene**

March 26, 2017

4th Sunday of Lent

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

No parabens, sulfates or phthalates!

That’s what it said on the box. I even had to look up how to pronounce “vthalate,” thinking, now really who was the bright one that thought it should begin with the letters phth? Marketers these days are telling consumers what's not in their products, believing that customers are more likely to buy something if they know it doesn't contain anything harmful.

NO MSG! - NO Parabens! - NO Sulfates! - NO Phthalates!...

You may not know what these things are, but if you see these NO items on a product, market research says you're more likely to say YES! You're more likely than not to *buy their product if they warn you what isn’t in them.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

For example, one nutritionist writes, "Would you eat your favorite breakfast cereal if you knew that it contained butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT), a product also used in jet fuel and embalming fluid?"

Probably not. So, if the cereal box screams "NO BHT!" as one I examined, marketers know that you're more likely to buy their cereal than a competitor's, *even if you've never heard of BHT and have no clue as to why it might be harmful!*Never mind the faulty reasoning in the statement itself. The fact that BHT is used in jet fuel is not entirely relevant to its use in describing it not being an ingredient in cereal. It rather makes one wonder if someone in packaging had just omitted the letter “S” between the “B” and “H” in BHT. But most of us would be wary of any product containing BHT now that we know what it is. Table salt, for example, is used to deodorize smelly tennis shoes, de-ice highways, kill weeds, whiten teeth, clean brass, clean the bottom of your iron and get grease out of a carpet. But even now, I am taking to reading the amount of sodium in most every product I consume by mouth.

In any event, you've no doubt wondered from time to time what's actually in your shampoo or your toothpaste. Perhaps you have looked at the list of unpronounceable ingredients on that jar of skin cream and wondered what each of those chemicals does and whether they really help.

 If you're like most people, you probably dump, rub, spritz, drizzle or ingest a host of stuff every day without ever knowing what's in the products you're using. We don't know what's bad for us unless somebody tells us, and these days marketers are doing that with increasing frequency as a way of separating their products from the rest of the pack.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Savvy and health-conscious consumers appreciate it, and are more likely to buy a product for what's not in it than for what is in it.

Check out an aisle in your grocery store and you may notice this trend of using "no" lists as a way of selling products that at least seem healthier for what they *don't* have in them. You may not know what phthalates are, for example, but when their absence is stamped on a box with "NO" attached to them, even the uninformed consumer breathes a sigh of relief. If it's something with a name that begins with four consonants in a row, it can't be good!

Some people will only buy products that say SUGAR-FREE or FAT-FREE. Some days I think to myself, “They are charging me for everything here, but throwing in the fat for free.”

It occurred to me that the apostle Paul employed a similar strategy, reminding the church in Ephesus that some things do not belong in the life of the believer. Christians are children of light, not darkness.

**A spiritual NO list**

When we look at the verses preceding today's Ephesians reading, we see that the apostle Paul was marketing the benefits of life in Christ to the members of the Ephesian church, and his strategy was that of a skilled promoter.

He begins with the YES stuff. He promotes the healthy benefits of being "imitators of God" and "living in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." Christ was no scent-free Savior, however, but "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (v. 1).

Having told them about the good ingredients, Paul then stamped out the "no" list of things that life in Christ does not include: NO Sexual Promiscuity! NO Impurity! NO Greed! NO Obscenities!

Check it out: "impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among the saints.” Entirely out of place is obscene vulgar talk ..." (vv. 3-4). These are the "unfruitful works of darkness" that characterized the life people lived before coming to Christ. (v. 10).

“Impurity" described a host of immoral sex practices outside of marriage. The Greco-Roman world was sexually charged, and a host of sexual practices were accepted. Having a mistress was common among men as was sex with female and male slaves, while women were forbidden from doing so. Cultic prostitution was still part of the Roman world, as was the common and regular practice of the oldest profession. (Paving stones in the ruins of Ephesus itself reveal that the paving stones were sometimes used as advertising for the local brothels.) Children could be sexually exploited, and babies that were the result of illicit sex (or even undesired by married couples) could be discarded and left to die.

Our own culture accepts a host of behaviors that may not be quite so healthy for us and we don’t want to pretend that we are not prone to casual things that may not always be helpful.

Nevertheless, Paul urges the Ephesians, and thereby us, to remember that such some of our practices may be on the "no" list for the Christian life. Later in verses 21-33, he lays out a vision of marriage as mutual submission between husband and wife as the kind of relationship that reflects the pure relationship of Christ and his bride, the church.

"Greed" is also on that "no" list. Paul understood greed as a form of idolatry, where the worship of material possessions could replace the worship of the God to whom all things belong and through whom every good gift is given[[3]](#footnote-3). While a number of immoralities can be identified as harmful ingredients in the Christian life, greed is less likely to be considered harmful. Imitating Christ means imitating his own generosity and honoring his wish that we share with those in need. There are many things for us to experience and enjoy in the world that God created but the relentless pursuit of wealth itself until one can never be satiated is questioned. (4:28).

**Even a little can hurt us**

The particular temptations we face suggests that *just a little bit of these things is not so bad*. So, it is not a matter of these things being *absolutely*wrong. They are wrong or harmful in terms of dosage. If we take too much of these "NO" items, it could seriously ruin our spiritual health. But if we indulge in small amounts, we'll be fine. This has often been my reasoning, but this kind of thinking can lead to a sense of false advertising. Some things that are lethal in large doses are beneficial in small doses (pain-killers, sleeping pills, chlorine in the water). But it doesn't necessarily work as cleanly in the life of faith.  We are continually challenged to be children of light and not of darkness.

Paul pushes the concept that when we pursue the things on the "no" list we can jeopardize our inheritance in "the kingdom of Christ and of God"[[4]](#footnote-4). Imitators of Christ should be careful about associations with things that are "disobedient" and continue to spiritually ingest these things that are harmful to their spiritual health[[5]](#footnote-5).

**No retreat from the world**

I don’t see this passage as saying that followers of Jesus are to retreat completely from the world, but rather they are to live as "children of light" whose fruit is found "in all that is good and true"[[6]](#footnote-6). They should seek out the ingredients of a life that is "pleasing to the Lord"[[7]](#footnote-7), and be careful about the enticements to the "unfruitful works of darkness" but "expose" them instead for what they are when they are harmful ingredients that ultimately contribute to spiritual demise.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Government regulations on consumer products help us to know what's in the stuff we buy. God is stringent when it comes to exposing the secret ingredients that people try to hide from God, from others and even from themselves[[9]](#footnote-9). When we become children of light, those secret ingredients become visible and we can become more discerning.[[10]](#footnote-10) This is the apostle, Paul providing a spiritual wake-up call or us and challenging us to become healthier.[[11]](#footnote-11) He is trying to plant some positive seeds so that we can then walk in the world as wise consumers, understanding God's will for ultimate health and wholeness for all God's people[[12]](#footnote-12).

Does this mean that if we were to live more like Jesus, that even if we become spiritually or physically healthier everything will go swimmingly well, that we will understand better how to handle the darkness of things? Well, I’m not so sure and we might get a glimpse of that in the long passage from the gospel of John today. I think that rather than use the word, “darkness” like Paul, the gospel creates a similar scene for using the word, “blind.”

But we can get caught in “blindness.” Maybe you read that story from Ann Landers years ago writing in the Washington Post. She told about Mrs. X who was stark-naked and just about to step into the shower when the doorbell rang. She hollered, "Who is it?" A fellow shouted back in return, "It's the blind man." She figured it was safe, so she opened the door. He looked at her in shock and asked, "Lady, where do you want me to hang these blinds?"

Or it’s like young Steven who was afraid of the dark. One night his mother told him to go out to the back porch and bring her the broom. Steven turned to his mother and said, “Mama, I don’t want to go out there. It’s dark.”

His mom smiled reassuringly, “You don’t have to be afraid of the dark. Jesus is out there. He’ll look after you and protect you.”

Steven looked hard and asked, “Are you sure he’s out there?”

“Yes, I’m sure. He is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need him,” she said.

Steven thought about that for a minute and then went to the back door and cracked it a little. Peering out into the darkness, he called, “Jesus? If you’re out there, would you please hand me the broom?”

So, let’s take darkness, sinfulness, and blindness back to first-century Palestine for a little while.

Day in and day out, as he sat there by the side of the road in Jerusalem, a man who'd been born without sight attuned all his other senses to those passing by-for instance, the large, slow-moving group approaching him now on this rather quiet Sabbath day. The man’s keen heightened sense of hearing and touch could tell that the group was large-by the quantity of dust blown into his nostrils-and he could tell that it was slow-moving-by sounds rising from their scuffing sandals. He could also tell from the pattern of conversation that it must be a rabbi and his entourage of followers.

As the group came alongside, the man for we never know his name, realized their topic had shifted to him. They'd noticed him, and one of the band asked the teacher that dreaded accusatory question, the one the blind man had heard far too many times before, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents; who sinned that he was born without sight?"

"Don't ask that!" He wanted to shout out in rising rage, as he remembered how often his parents had reassured him that his lack of sight had nothing to do with punishment for sin. In the face of all the hazards and illnesses children encounter, there often lingers that question in a parent’s mind, “Did I do or not do something I should have done that now my child has to suffer the consequences of my behavior?” And, if his father was a good Jew, he probably recalled how often his father had tried to convince and reassure him by retelling that wonderful old story about Job.

So, to avoid being hurt once again, the man started to shut down his faculties, especially his hearing so that he might turn inward, where he could once more listen to the words his hero Job had addressed his accusers, those defiant words that offered him such consolation: "I am innocent!"[[13]](#footnote-13) We can only imagine what hope surged when this teacher, so different from the rest of the religiously knowledgeable who had passed by before responded to his disciples and said, **"Neither this man nor his parents sinned."[[14]](#footnote-14)**

"Yes," the man exclaimed inwardly! So, pleased was he by what he'd just heard that he missed whatever words the rabbi said next! You see, he'd done what we often do when we hear the news we want or the news that brings us fear, he'd instinctively retreated to his inner being, moving to that realm of light and beauty within, where the true and living God would meet him to offer consolation in the midst of despair.

In a scene from the chilling film Unforgiven, a young gun-slinger from the Old West is trying to convince himself he did nothing wrong in having just shot another man dead. "Well," he nervously muses aloud, "I reckon he had it coming to him." To this, Clint Eastwood's character replies, "We all got it coming to us, kid." That scene is one of those startling vignettes of common grace by which a vital theological truth whip-saws your whole being from the middle of a rather unholy context. We all got it coming to us. It's too easy sometimes to see someone suffer something but then conclude, "Well, he got what he deserved, got what he asked for. She smoked too much, he ate at McDonalds too often, he engaged in high-risk sex, she didn't take her medications regularly, he wouldn't listen to his parents. He had it coming to him. She got what she asked for. (And by the way, I'm glad I'm not like that!)" And here, I remind us is where we get into trouble, when we have listened to all of the “No items” on Paul’s list to the Ephesians and become sanctimoniously self-righteous so that this attitude becomes our sin.

If the gospel contains good news, it is that by God's grace, none of us get what we otherwise deserve. That's why grace is good news, and it's not just good news for other people but for me, for you. Does this mean we may never warn someone of the potential consequences of this or that action? Does John 9 mean we may never draw any conclusions as to what may have brought about a given tragedy? No, but it does mean that we should never do so from some alleged position of spiritual superiority and, above all, it means that we need to be very, very shy about claiming we always know the cause-and-effect relationship of most every situation.

The story in John is quite long. The self-righteous Pharisees will find in this blind man’s healing a chance to denounce Jesus because the man was healed on the Sabbath and they caught Jesus breaking the law. They will question whether the cause of blindness was his or his parents’ sin. They will interrogate the man and his parents and this newly sighted man will inquire if they want to become followers of Jesus, too. But in the midst of the intrigue and analysis, we may miss that the man was made well and that Jesus did so with a little saliva and dirt.

Toasts that started in the muddy trenches of World War I, or in the cafes where English and American soldiers spent their leaves trying to forget them included "Cheers!" "Bottoms up!" "Here's a toast to you!" and "Here's mud in your eye!" [[15]](#footnote-15)

A Google search confirmed for me that "Here's mud in your eye" is a humorous drinking toast. But then, of course, I wanted to know, "But what's the origin of that toast? Why those particular words?" This led to Morten's List of Toasts, a handy little site when you are invited to a wedding where everyone speaks Urdu, you know that a potential single word toast is “Djam.” And there under English toasts it says: Here's mud in your eye (UK, vulgar) (expression from Bible, John 9:1-41)[[16]](#footnote-16)

For according to Morten's List, this toast may have arisen from the Bible story found in the 9th chapter of the Gospel of John where "mud in the eye" is a medium of healing and well-being, like that beverage that's about to go down! It is a toast that says, even though life has been difficult and we don’t understand it, even the worst of circumstances can change quickly. When days are dark and you blindly stumble through them and don’t know what to do, there is this toast. It is a toast that says, be hopeful even that which seems foolish or adding injury to insult will make a positive difference in the end.

Let’s have no butylated hydroxytoluene. Let’s have no behaviors that make us spiritually blind, but let us be children of light. Here’s mud in your eye!

**Commentary on Ephesians 5**

The Pauline author begins today’s pericope by introducing a light vs. darkness dualism to illustrate the "that was then -- this is now" character of a Christian's new life. "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light" (v. 8). The implication here is weighty. A human is not a morally neutral being who happens to reside "in" a particular locus: first "in" the darkness before Christ came, and then "in" the light after Christ. One is described as being of either one element or another. Before Christ there was only darkness. After Christ, some become children of light, others not.

There is a sense of spiritual natural selection at work. Christ is the variable factor which allows some to be fruitful. Good trees, after all, bear good fruit. Likewise, bad trees bear bad fruit (Matthew 7:17-20). One's elemental being is manifested in "the fruit of the light" (v. 9). Those who are darkness, who do things in secret, are fruitless (v. 11). One's status vis-a-vis Jesus produces either fruitfulness or barrenness. Hence there is a product associated with belief. However, the emphasis in this passage is less on production of fruitful work and more on the description of generation -- whence comes the seed? As the letter concludes, it is apparent that the battle for the "survival of the fittest" is ongoing between the children of light and the "cosmic powers of this present darkness" (6:12).

The author's use of the light vs. darkness motif is not exactly the same as in other places in the NT. For example, in John's gospel, Jesus is the light that illumines the darkness (1:8). In Ephesians, there is little emphasis on light dispelling darkness. Rather, the light stands in opposition to the darkness.

This drastic, dualistic worldview seems more at home in the monastic and apocalyptic communities found in the first-century desert of the Negev or the equally mysterious communities of the Gnostics of later centuries. However, one should be careful making too quick of an assignation of precedence or trajectory.

Despite its cosmic language, there is a pointed pastoral concern here. Behind the somber tone hides a community or communities of Christians who have forgotten their standing as believers. Doctrinal confusion, doubt, backsliding and everyday stress have caused division within the community.

Sometimes believers need to be addressed in stark "black-and-white" terminology in order to re-focus on the essentials. Even the "saints" sin and need to be agitated to return to purity of doctrine and lifestyle. Certainly, the early Christian community was beset with the same sinner / saint mix as any modern congregation. However, it may well be that the language is more harsh than the actual action. If every Christian community rid itself of everyone who said frivolous things, or used vulgar language, or was greedy, or manifested no fruit or light, there would not be much of a church left in the first century or the 21st (vv. 3-5).

Nevertheless, if one claims to be of Christ, then it should be recognizable in conduct. Actually, the prohibitions are, for the most part, fairly practical. If you are of Christ you control your body and your mouth (vv. 3-5). If you are of Christ you are not deceived by empty words and you don't keep company with those who try to deceive (v. 6). If you are of Christ, be focused on what is good and right and true. If you are of Christ then the "fruit of the light" will be self-evident.

What is interesting in these verses is that the believer is not specifically told what life in the light is -- only what it is not. The mood of verse 10 is not entirely clear and is open to interpretation. It may be a sarcastic, plaintive cry, as is made by a parent to recalcitrant children: "Would you please try to find out what is pleasing to God!?" Or, it may be a pastoral exhortation to be disciplined in the practice of faithful living that will lead to the discovery of deeper ways to please God. Probably both tones are intended. Whatever the case, the believer patterns her or his life after Jesus, who was the perfect sacrifice of love and became the "fragrant offering" which was pleasing to God (v. 2).

A final note of redemption is lifted up. In community, Christ calls us to reprove one another, to discipline, to correct, in order to restore relationships. Being "exposed" in this way is a faithful expression of trust in grace. Therefore, faithful living is about being open, not closeted. A believer should not keep secrets or do secret things which imply shame. A believer who "exposes" another's sin should not treat the wrongdoer with contempt or as gossip fodder; this, too, is shameful (v. 12). Rather, since the light of Christ is revealed in truth-telling, then Christians need to be truthful. When people are honest with self and others, speaking the truth in love, then the light shines in power. It is a wake-up call, as the three-lined hymn which ends verse 14 declares.

Exhortation to holiness is always a two-edged sword. When humbly inner-directed, the self-evaluation calls one back to basic truths about Christian faith and fellowship. When, however, the call to holiness becomes a self-righteous proclamation used to divide who is in from who is out, then there is a very real danger of leading the Christian over the edge of joyful proclamation toward fear-based judgment. What is certain is that claiming to be part of the children of light necessitates living as if one really believed it. Fruit is, after all, what fruit does.

1. Holmes, Elizabeth. "'No' lists on labels make shoppers say 'Yes.'" *The Wall Street Journal Website*. May 25, 2016. wsj.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Goldschmidt, Vivian. "12 dangerous and hidden food ingredients in seemingly healthy foods." *Save Institute Website*. saveourbones.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Verse 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Verses 5 – 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Verse 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Verses 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Verse 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Verse 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Verse 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Verse 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Verse 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Verses 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is a reference to Job 9:15, 20; 34:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John 9:3a. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. https://www.etiquettescholar.com/dining\_etiquette/toasting\_etiquette/international\_toasts.html [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. https://idiomation.wordpress.com/2011/01/31/mud-in-your-eye/ [↑](#footnote-ref-16)