I once heard the political commentator Jonah Goldberg go on a rant about the term greatest generation as applied to those who were of the age to fight in the Second World War. He was against the title saying that if you had climbed the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc on D-Day then certainly you were deserving of this title, but if you spent D-day in the drunk tank in Peoria you were not allowed to glom onto this moniker. The point he was making was that just because an individual may have certain similarities with a group (i.e. being born during a given period of time) this does not automatically allow one to claim the accolades given to the best and bravest of that generation. In the same way that my going to college with Gavin Newsom, the Governor of California neither makes me a governor nor gives me important hair. And it is this distinction between having similarities with a group and actually being fully part of that group that Paul is discussing today in the text from Ephesians. He says, “Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.” Or summed up we could state it like this: Yes you have come out of darkness but that is not enough to be a Christian, in order to be Christian you need to live as children of the light. And for you non-English majors out there this may sound a bit like a metaphor gone wild. For is there really a difference between not being in or of the dark and being in the light? Well I believe that there is so let’s take a few moments and see if we can arrive at some satisfactory understandings of the difference between avoiding the darkness and living in the light.

In our Lenten book study we have been going through Henri Nouwen’s book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. It’s a good book and one of the reasons for this is rather than just focusing on the Prodigal Son it covers all three of the main characters in the parable – the Prodigal Son, the Older Brother and the Father. And in reading the passage we have from Paul today it reminds me of the way in which Nouwen discuses the Older Brother. If you remember from the Parable the Older Brother was the one who did not go off and squander his father’s wealth but rather stayed at home and did what his Father asked him to do. His speaking lines come when his younger brother has returned home and his father has thrown an elaborate party to welcome him back. At the end of the Parable he states his anger with his Father rather explicitly saying, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” Nouwen assesses the Older Son’s anger in this way saying, “Not only did the younger son, who left home to look for freedom and happiness in a distant country, get lost, but the one who stayed home also became a lost man. Exteriorly he did all the things a good son is supposed to do, but, interiorly, he wandered away from his father. He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled his obligations but became increasingly unhappy and unfree…There are many elder sons and elder daughters who are lost while still at home. And it is this lostness – characterized by judgment and condemnation, anger and resentment, bitterness and jealousy – that is so pernicious and damaging to the human heart.” And I would say it is the Older Brother who encapsulates this idea of coming out of the dark, but not walking in the light. He has it half right. He does the things that are asked of him, he comes out of the darkness but he does these things not in the freedom of love but rather in the bondage of slavery. He does not love to help his Father, but rather does so because it is how he is expected to behave by the society in which he lives. You could say that he is following the unwritten law, the law that dictates the behavior of Older Sons. He follows it because he wants to be seen as the right type of son, the type of son who is the opposite of his younger brother. His perceived loyalty to his Father is done to show others who he is and therefore his identity is not tied up in love but rather in fear. Fear of what others think of him. And this is why he cannot bear his Father showing love to his wayward brother. The Older Brother believes that you are only worthwhile if you do certain actions and that love is conditional. And it is because of this limited understanding of how Godly love works that he is so insistent that his younger brother cannot be loved but only punished.

And while it is certainly better in a society for people to behave in good and upstanding ways if they do not take the final step, the step to be children of the light all sorts of undesirable, but less visible, behaviors will exist. Like an iceberg where most of its mass lies unseen, when we keep parts of us hidden from the light, those things are capable of all sorts of untrue beliefs and attitudes. In the case of this parable the Older Brother would rather see his Younger Brother condemned because the god he worships is incapable of the kind of love that his Father shows. Because when right behavior is not done for the right reasons it can lead us to hate the very things that we should love. And that is why Paul does not simply say for us to behave well, but is instead call for the total transformation. Let’s look again at how he states it. He says, “The fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.” The important word is all. We cannot just have the parts of our lives that are readily visible look correct, but everything about us from top to bottom. The Older Brother needed not to simply do the things that society expected of him but he needed to do them because he loved his father and who his father was.

And certainly this is not easy. We all like to hold on to things that are not of God, like anger, bitterness and jealousy, but we must ask are those good things? Does anyone come home from work and say, “I had a great day, I was bitter and jealous the whole time.” These feelings are demonstrating a problem and that problem is a being that is at war with itself. A being that knows what is right, but does what is right for the wrong reasons. If we are the good child, the one who follows the rules, gives money to charity and calls Mom once a week, that is great. But if we use this information to look down on all of the people who do not live the way we live, we probably need to ask ourselves why we are doing them in the first place – is it out of love or is it to give ourselves standing and to make us feel better than others? This is a hard lesson because it asks us to set aside our egos and our own sense of how the world should work. It asks us to show the kind of love that God shows. The kind of love that dies on a cross for the very people that put him up on the cross. That is the crazy thing that God calls us to. To walk as children of the light giving up our entire being to God’s love now and forevermore.