

Let Your Little Light Shine

Matthew 5:14-16

A children's story entitled *The Lighthouse Children* describes a family who lived in a lighthouse that stood on the rocky shoreline of the ocean. Night after night it shone a brilliant beam of light out across the dark, dangerous waters, warning ships of the perilous rocks that lay lurking beneath and directing the ships to the safety of the harbour. The lighthouse was home to a family of four, and the family was there for one purpose: to keep the light atop the lighthouse burning.

Then, on a stormy night, father fell ill. Mother had to tend to father, and she sent the children to tend to the light. Upon reaching the top of the lighthouse, the children found that though the light was on, the mechanism that caused it to rotate had stopped working. The beam was shining only toward the land, making it invisible to the ships on the sea.

Knowing that the safety of the ships at sea was dependant on powerful beam of light rotating round and round, the children worked tirelessly to keep it rotating by turning the hand-powered wheel that served as a backup. It was far too hard for one child to turn alone, but with the combined strength of brother and sister, they could keep it turning. The night wore on. The storm raged. Minutes seemed like hours; days seemed like years. Their hands grew tired. They grew weary and wept. But they kept the light burning. They kept the reflector turning until the dawning of the light of a new day.

The captains at sea could see the light. They steered their ships to the safety of the harbour and thanked God for the light which saved them from certain destruction. The children did not know how many ships were saved that night. But they shone the light, and it was used by God to save many sailors.

This story is an illustration of who we are as followers of Jesus Christ ("the light of the world," v.14) and what we are called to do ("let your light shine before men," v.16).

Let's consider verses 14-16 by looking at 1) the light 2) the basket, and 3) the lampstand.

1. The Light

In the Bible, light symbolizes moral purity, perfection, and holiness. When God created the world, the entire universe was resplendent with the light of His glory. There was no impurity or imperfection. Not even in Adam and Eve. Just as God is light and there is no darkness in Him at all (1 John 1:5), so also for Adam and Eve: they were light and there was no darkness in them at all. They bore God's image perfectly. Everything was very good. But only until Satan rebelled against God. He then set a storm of rebellion into motion by successfully tempting Adam and Eve to rebel against God. In so doing, they joined the kingdom of darkness (Col.1:13-14).

Dark clouds blocked the light of God's glory that day. Adam and Eve were banished from the light of God's presence when they were evicted from the Garden of Eden. The world plunged into moral and spiritual darkness. And this darkness is with us still. But God did not let the darkness snuff the light of His glory out. He shone a ray of light into the darkness by breaking up the friendship between His enemy, Satan, His people, Adam and Eve. And He shone another ray of light by providing an animal to die in place of Adam and Eve. This animal pointed forward Jesus who would come into the world as the true light. The golden lampstand in the tabernacle and temple also pointed forward to the time when the light of God would again shine in the world. And at just the right time, Jesus came into the world as The Light of the world.

The children's song has it right: "The light of the world is Jesus." And God began to reveal that Jesus is the light of the world already on the night He was born. Shepherds were watching their flocks in the darkness of night. And then, to announce Jesus birth to them, Luke 2:9 tells us that the glory of the Lord shone down from the skies, dispelling the darkness, illuminating the field, and startling the shepherds. John's Gospel also describes the entrance of Jesus into the world in the same way, saying in chapter one that Jesus is "the light of men" (v.4), a light that "shines in the darkness" (v.5), and "the true light that gives light to every man" (v.9).

Going back to Matthew's Gospel, we see that Jesus is also described as 'The Light' in the preceding chapter. In Matthew 4:13-16, we read:

"And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: ¹⁵ 'The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: ¹⁶ The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned'" (cf. Isaiah 9:1-2).

When Jesus arrived on the stage of human history, God was shining His Spotlight into the darkness of the world. Through His purity of life, His powerful miracles, His authoritative teaching, and His mighty resurrection, Jesus was dispelling the darkness of a sin-stained world with the light of His presence. Jesus Himself declared in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world." And the Apostle Paul says that when Jesus appeared, He "destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10).

So we note that before giving us the identity of 'light' and before calling us to be 'light', the Bible teaches us that Jesus is The Light. This is an important point to remember.

God is, by nature, light. But we are, by nature, darkness. "You were once darkness," writes the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:8 (see also: 1 Peter 2:9). We are by nature spiritually blind, born with hearts that are darkened by sin. This is bad news. It means we are destined for the eternal darkness of hell. Unless—unless the light of God shines in our hearts and dispels the darkness.

If you believe that you are a sinner and that Jesus Christ is your Savior, then something amazing has happened. A miracle has occurred! God shone the light of His Word (Psalm 119:105) into your heart, causing the darkness to vanish. He caused you to believe that Christ is The Light of the world. This is a miracle equal in power to that which God worked while creating the world when He called light to shine forth in the midst of the darkness. The Apostle Paul describes the miracle of calling His light to shine forth in our hearts in with these words: "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). Just as God dispelled the physical darkness at the dawn of creation by saying, "Let there be light," so He dispelled the spiritual darkness in our hearts by saying, "Let there be light! Let Jesus be brightly shining in your heart." If you believe in Jesus as your Savior, that is how you were converted.

And when we were converted, we received a new identity: light. The Apostle Paul speaks of this in Ephesians 5:8, saying, "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." And Jesus says to us, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14).

It is important to remember that before we are called 'the light of the world', Jesus was and is The Light of the world. Jesus is the original light, the source of our light. We are secondary lights that depend on and

reflect His light.

Maybe these two examples will help. Think of the sun and the moon. The sun, that great big, burning ball of fire, is the source of light. The moon simply reflects the light of the sun. And the moon will give light only if it is in the presence of the sun. Or think of a glow-in-the-dark object. It needs to be in the presence of another source of light to charge the phosphors that make it glow. Only after being charged by an external light will it give off light.

The same is true for us. The only way we can be lights is if we are in the presence of The Light of the Son, Jesus Christ. He is the source of the light. Where do we need to be to be in the presence of Jesus? We need to be in church where He speaks to us through preaching and teaching and singing. We need to be in the Bible throughout the week, for the Bible, “is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path” (Psalm 119:105). And we need to be in prayer, which is a way of being in the presence of Jesus. By being in the presence of The Light, we will shine as lights.

Jesus says He is The Light and we are little lights. He then speaks of a basket.

2. The Basket

To understand the function of the basket, it is helpful to understand more specifically what kind of light Jesus is talking about. The lamp He speaks of (vs.15) is a little clay lamp that everyone had in their home. It burned olive oil that was drawn up through a wick. The base of the lamp was the size of a small saucer, and its wick rose a few inches above the base. This lamp was small enough that it could easily be covered by another common household object, a “basket” or kneading bowl that was ever on hand for when bread dough needed to be kneaded. Jesus then states what seems like the obvious: “No one lights their household lamp and then puts their kneading bowl over it.”

“Why, of course not!” we’re ready to respond. “That would be pointless! It would be a waste of oil! And soon the lamp would go out anyway because it would be starved of oxygen.”

Jesus is telling us that we must not put a basket over our Christ-light. We must not cover up or darken our Christian identity and our Christian witness. But so often we do, don’t we? Let’s briefly consider three baskets that can block the light of Christ from shining in and from us.

The first basket I’m thinking of is the fear of man. We can be scared or worried about what others will think of us if they find out that we are Christians, and so we hide our Christian identity, not letting others know we love Jesus, for fear that they might hate, mock, or look down on us, or prevent us from getting that job or that promotion we want.

The second basket is isolation. We can cut ourselves off from the world by living the entirety of our Christian lives within the confines of a little Christian bubble consisting of a Christian home, a Christian school, a Christian workplace with a Christian boss and Christian co-workers, and—to top it off—we can spend the weekend with our Christian family and friends in a Christian church. While it is most necessary to surround ourselves with other Christians, we must remember that to have no interaction with non-Christians is to block the light of Christ with the basket of isolation.

The third basket is worldliness. Worldliness refers to thinking, talking, living, and loving like the world. When we use coarse or crass language, or laugh at dirty jokes, or take part in dishonest business transactions or questionable business practices, or when we cheat in school, we are not shining the light of Christ. Instead, we are committing deeds of darkness (Ephesians 5:11).

Jesus dispelled the darkness we were born with by shining His light into our hearts and setting us aglow for His glory. We must not block His light by covering it with the baskets of fear, isolation or worldliness. Instead, Jesus tells us we are to put the light of our Christian witness on the lampstand.

3. The Lampstand

What is the lampstand? The walls of most houses in Jesus' day were made of stone held together by mortar. When masons built these walls, they would keep their eye out for a flat, shelf-like rock and place it in such a way that it protruded into the house, forming a little ledge on which the lamp could be placed. From there, the little olive-oil lamp would shine its light all throughout the house.

If we read verse 15 in connection with verse 14, we see that the 'house' in which Jesus' disciples are to shine their light is not just Nazareth or Judea or even the Roman empire. It is much broader than that. Our house is the whole world. We are to shine the light of the Gospel of Christ across the globe. The mission to which Jesus calls is us a global mission!

And how are we to let our little lights shine? What is Jesus telling us to do so that we reflect His light into the sin-darkened world? Engage in political activism? Start up big mission works or social justice organizations? Verbally spread the Gospel? Give lots of money to organizations that do so? These are certainly ways in which we can and ought to shine the light of Christ. But Jesus is starting with something far simpler. Something very ordinary. Yet something very powerful. He tells us in verse 16 that we are to let our little lights shine *by* doing good works. And if we look at the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, we quickly realize He is talking about keeping the Ten Commandments. He is talking about loving God and loving our neighbor. He is talking about living a life that is un-spotted (un-darkened) by the world. Too often people who call themselves Christians disregard the commands of Christ. But by living the way Christ wants us to live, we reflect His light.

Conclusion

As we conclude, think back to *The Lighthouse Children*. For Paul and Rene, the night seemed so long as they worked to keep the light atop the lighthouse shining out into the darkness. Their hands grew tired and weary. They wept and wanted to give up. But by working together, they kept the light shining. Jesus calls us to do the same.

Maybe you are discouraged by how small and dim the light of the church is compared to the darkness of society. Remember how things were in Elijah's day. The light of the church was only 7,000 candelas strong, yet the Lord preserved His church. Also, remember, that no matter how thick the darkness gets, it will not snuff the light of Christ out. He is the eternal, inextinguishable light. As long as we stay in His presence, His light will keep shining in us and reflecting from us. And the winds of the world's darkness cannot and will not blow it out. He promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church (Matthew 16:18). To put the same promise another way, Satan's kingdom of darkness will not prevail against Jesus' kingdom of light.

Finally, a couple concluding thoughts to encourage us to keep our Christ-lights shining. The children in the lighthouse did not know how many sailors were saved that night as they shone the light out into the darkness—but many sailors were saved! Similarly, we do not know how many sinners are saved as we shine our Christ-lights—but we trust and pray that many are! Think also of how long they had to keep the light shining. They had to keep it shining all throughout the long and stormy night until the light of a new day dawned. So also, we need to keep the light of Christ shining until the light of the new day, the eternal day, dawns. That day will begin when Christ returns on the clouds of glory, shining in all His brilliance to usher in His kingdom of eternal light in which there will be no darkness at all (Revelation 21:23)!