

## THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Matthew 5:14-16

A couple took their young son and daughter to Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. When the tour reached the deepest point in the cavern, the guide turned off all the lights to dramatize how completely dark and silent it is below the earth's surface. The little girl, suddenly enveloped in utter darkness, was frightened and began to cry. Then she heard the voice of her brother, saying, "Don't cry. Somebody here knows how to turn on the lights."

This is the good news of Jesus Christ. There is somebody who is able to turn on the lights for those engulfed in the darkness of sin. But you may be surprised about where Jesus says this light is found. Matthew 5:14 says, "You are the light of the world."

These familiar words have massive implications. Think about it. God created light. Genesis 1:3 says, "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." James 1:17 says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation nor shadow due to change." Likewise, God controls the light. In Joshua 10, Israel's army is defeating its enemy in battle. But the sun began to go down, giving the enemy an opportunity to retreat. Joshua prayed. And the Lord made the sun stand still, until the fighting men of Israel defeated the enemy. I cannot explain how God did that. But the Bible says it and I believe it. God controls the light. In fact, God is light. 1 John 1:5 says, "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."

In John 8:12, Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In this statement, Jesus claims to be God. It was a scandalous claim. But Jesus makes an even more scandalous claim in Matthew 5:14: "You are the light of the world." This is the second of two statements about how Christ-followers maximize kingdom influence. Matthew 5:13 says: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet." Salt is a dynamic metaphor for the influence Christians are to have in the world. But it is not as powerful as the metaphor of light. Salt seasons. Light transforms. Jesus says, "You are the light of the world." The pronoun "you" is plural. The church and every redeemed member is the light of the world. It is emphatic: "You, and only you, are the light of the world." What a wonderful privilege, awesome responsibility, and important stewardship! The Lord wants to use you to change the world! Let's consider the call to be the light of the world by asking three questions of the text.

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### I. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD?

In verse 14, Jesus says: "You are the light of the world." Jesus does not command us to become light. He says you are light. The pronoun is plural. Followers of Christ are the light of the world. This metaphor teaches that God is more concerned about what you are than what you do. Character precedes performance. A godly life is the

foundation for good works. Before any call to action, Jesus defines our identity in him. You are the light of the world. There is bad news and good news here.

#### A. THE WORLD IS DARK.

When you are in the dark, you cannot see. Things are not clear. You trip over little things. You bump into other people. You run into things. You hurt yourself. You cannot find what you are looking for. And you easily get lost in the dark. Isaiah 60:1-2 says, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness upon the peoples.” The world is covered with intense and intentional darkness.

IT IS INTENSE DARKNESS. In Genesis 19, God sent two angels to rescue Lot and his family before he destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot, Abraham’s nephew, met them at the gate. Lot invited the two men home with him. They rejected his invitation. But Lot insisted. The men of the city gathered outside of Lot’s house, demanding the two men be brought out. Lot offered to send out his two virgin daughters, rather than his two male guests. But they threatened Lot and tried to knock down the door right thru him. But the angels snatched Lot into the house. Genesis 19:11 reads: “And they struck with blindness the men who were at the entrance of the house, both small and great, so that they wore themselves out groping for the door.” This is the intense darkness of the world. People wear themselves out groping after sin.

IT IS INTENTIONAL DARKNESS. John 3:16-17 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” These are famous and important words. The next two verses are not as famous but just as important. John 3:18-19 says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.” Light has come in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the world rejects the light to enjoy the darkness. This is what total depravity means.

- People love darkness rather than light.
- People love sin rather than righteousness.
- People love iniquity rather than holiness.
- People love lies rather than truth.
- People love deception rather than reality.
- People love self rather than God.
- People love worldly pleasure rather than spiritual blessings.

My first year of high school, I walked about a mile from school to Crenshaw Blvd. I rode the bus down Crenshaw and then walked another mile home. Many days, I sat with my eyes closed the whole ride. But I was not sleep. My father taught me that a man gives up his seat when he sees

a woman standing. So I rode home with my eyes closed. If I didn't see a woman standing, I was not obligated to give up my seat. Unfortunately, this is how many people live.

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## B. CHRISTIANS ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

CHRISTIANS ARE REFLECTED LIGHT. In John 9:5, Jesus says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." But in Matthew 5:14, Jesus says to his disciples, "You are the light of the world." How is it Jesus is the light of the world and we are the light of the world? The simple answer is that we are not the light, in and of ourselves. Christian light is reflected light. It does not originate with us. It comes from and through the Lord Jesus Christ. When Christ was in the world; he was like the shining sun at midday. When the sun sets, the moon comes up. But the moon does not shine with its own light. It reflects the light of the sun. BROOKE FOSS WESTCOTT wrote: "At times the church has been a full moon, dazzling the world with an almost daytime light. And at other times the church has been only a thumbnail moon, with very little light shining upon the earth. But whether the church is a full moon or a new thumbnail moon, waxing or waning, it reflects the light of the Son."

IT IS INHERENT LIGHT. 1 Peter 2:9 says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Without Christ, we were in the dark. But God has called us into his marvelous light. But we are not just in the light. We are light. Ephesians 5:8 says, "For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." We were the personification of darkness. But now we are light in the Lord. The Lord did not merely change our circumstances. He made a change within us. We who were darkness are now light in the Lord. JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE wrote: "If it is only a question of seeking the light or living in the light, then Christianity is no different from any other religion or philosophy, and there is no more hope from it than from any of them. But if becoming a Christian involves a change from darkness to light, then the presence of Christians in the world is itself hope as together we stand against the darkness."

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## II. WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEING THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

In verses 14b-15, Jesus explains that light cannot and should not be hidden.

### A. LIGHT CANNOT BE HIDDEN.

Matthew 5:14 says, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden." Ancient travelers did not have bright lights, directional signs, and paved highways to aid their journey. Most people only traveled during the day. Sometimes the darkness would fall before the traveler made it to the next town. The darkness would

put him in a dangerous situation. Thieves, robbers, and predators waited to take advantage of the vulnerable sojourner. But when the traveler saw the lights of the hilltop city, it brought direction, comfort, and safety. That is what Jesus calls us to be in this dark world. The church is a city set on the hill that cannot be hidden. As kingdom citizens, it should be impossible to blend in with the world. The world understands this. When they catch us saying or doing something we should not, they say, “I thought you were a Christian.” They are right. If you are a Christian, you ought to stand out.

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#### B. LIGHT SHOULD NOT BE HIDDEN.

Verse 14 says it is impossible to hide light: “A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” Verse 15 says it is illogical to hide light: “Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.” This ridiculous scenario is an important warning about kingdom influence. A city set on the hill speaks of the position God gives us in salvation. A light hidden under the basket speaks of the purpose the Lord gives us in salvation. God didn’t save you to hide you. Salt works covertly. Its power operates as it disappears into the food. But light works openly. Proverbs 31:18 commends the virtuous woman: “Her lamp does not go out at night.” While others sleep, she keeps the lights burning as she continues working for her family. This is how the Christian should live in the world. We are to live openly, consistently, and boldly for others to see Jesus in us. What is it that tempts you to hide your light? 1 Thessalonians 5:5 says: “For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night nor of the darkness.” Human parents get upset when their children leave lights on in the house. But the heavenly Father gets upset when his children turn off the lights. Don’t let anything make you hide your light!

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### III. WHAT IS YOUR DUTY AS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD?

Verse 16 commands: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

#### A. THE MANDATE

Verse 16 says: “Let your light shine before others.” This is no recommendation. It is a divine mandate. Jesus commands us to shine as lights. There are no imperatives in the “salt” metaphor of verse 13. Jesus seems to trust the hearer to get the point of salt losing its flavor. Like unsalty salt, worldly Christians are spiritually useless. But he does not leave it to us figure out the point of the “light” metaphor. Jesus explicitly commands us to let our lights shine before others. It is not enough to let our lights shine Sunday mornings when all the lights get together for corporate worship. We are to let our lights shine at all times, in every place, no matter the circumstances.

A college student talked to his pastor about his dissatisfaction with his living arrangements. He wanted to move. The pastor asked why. "Well," he said, "I'm the only Christian there." "I still don't understand why you want to move," the pastor replied. "Because I'm the only Christian there," the young man insisted, "And it's such a dark place." The pastor answered, "It would seem to me that the darker the place the brighter the light that's needed."

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## B. THE MODE

Jesus commands: **"Let your light shine before others, so that others may see your good works."** Jesus does not say others should hear our words. He says others should see our works. Romans 10:14 asks: "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?" Hearing is essential for salvation. But what people hear us say should not be contradicted by what they see us do. We must declare the truth of Christ and demonstrate the love of Christ. The world should see our good works. The word "good" refers to apparent goodness. The Christian life should be filled with works of service that make Christ attractive to others. Titus 2:10 exhorts believers to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior." The verb "adorn" is where we get our word "cosmetics." Our good works should make Christ beautiful to others. Salvation is a gift you receive, not a reward you earn. But Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." In Matthew 6:1-18, Jesus warns us not to give, pray, or fast to be seen by others. But here he says our good works should be seen by others. Good works are a key way to go public for Jesus. We don't shout at the darkness. We turn on the lights by showing the mercy of Christ in dark places.

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## C. THE MOTIVE

Why should we let our lights shine in the world? Verse 16 answers: **"Let your light shine before others, so that others may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."** Others should see your good works. But you should not get the credit for what they see. Your good works should cause others to give glory to your Father who is in heaven. In Matthew 6:9, Jesus teaches us to address God, **"Our Father in heaven."** This is who God is to us through faith in the finished work of Christ. "Father" indicates the immanence of God. "In heaven" indicates the transcendence of God. God is intimately near us and infinitely beyond us. In Christ we are beneficiaries of the amazing grace and sovereign authority of God. We are covered by God's love and power. This is why we should let our lights shine. So others may see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven. JOHN MACARTHUR wrote: "This is the supreme calling of life: glorifying God. Everything we do is to cause others to give praise to the God who is the source of all that is good."

As a boy preacher, Pastor Roland Jenneford invited me to speak at youth day at the New Guiding Light Baptist Church in Pasadena. When the service started, I sat in the pastor's study alone waiting for preaching time. But I could see all the people coming in. I got the big head very quickly. But when I went to the pulpit, the packed auditorium was not happy. As I preached, half the people left. I later discovered the local church newspaper mistakenly put a picture of my dad in the ad, instead of me. The congregation was upset, because they did not come to see me. They came to see my father. As you let your light shine, remember they did not come to see you. Our Father in heaven deserves all the glory!