

**Light of the World**

St. Matthew 5:14-16

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Last week we looked at Part One of Jesus' description of the Christ-follower as salt and light. Last week we looked at what it means for us to be salt. This week I want to look at what it means for us to be light. But first remember that both of these descriptions of the Christian immediately follow the Beatitudes – Jesus' description of the norm, the character, of his Kingdom.

When Jesus talks about salt and light, he's talking about our witness. He's told us what the norms of the Kingdom are. What we need to understand at this point is that those norms, as they're lived out in the lives of his Kingdom people, are what constitute the witness of the Kingdom – its salt and light. Jesus' Kingdom people are to be poor in spirit (knowing their sin and that they cannot earn God's favour); they are to mourn (not only their sin, but also the sin of those around them); they are meek (giving up their own rights in the knowledge that they're no better than any other person on earth); they hunger and thirst for the righteousness that they lack (the righteousness that Christ offers of himself); they are merciful (because their one great desire is to share with others the mercy God has shown them); they are pure in heart (not only because they are covered by the righteousness of Christ, but because they seek to conform to his image); they are peacemakers (because God has made peace with them and they want to share it); and finally, because the character of the Christ-follower is so drastically different from that of the natural man, they are persecuted on account of their righteous character.

And when it comes to persecution, notice that Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are you *if* men persecute you." No. He says, "Blessed are you *when* men persecute you." It's not a matter of *if* – it's a matter of *when*. We may not live in ancient Judea where Christians were stoned for professing faith in Christ, we may not live where emperors throw us to lions, and we

may not live in a place where we're sent into Siberian exile or made political prisoners for the sake of the Gospel – although that does appear sadly to be changing in Canada – but persecution doesn't have to be extreme. Jesus also has in mind the fact that even on an informal and personal level, those who faithfully follow him in living out the norms of the Kingdom will face the ire and animosity of the men and women of the world.

Jesus told us we are the salt of the earth. In Matthew 5:14 he goes on to tell us:

You are the light of the world.

If we're the light, Jesus' statement means that the world is dark. You don't put a light somewhere if it's not dark there. If a place is already light, it doesn't really need light.

The world needs a light because it's dark – really, really dark. Modern men of a couple hundred years ago started talking about the "Dark Ages." The men of the Enlightenment of the 18th Century looked back a few hundred years to the Middle Ages, and despite the fact that Christianity was the dominant cultural force in Europe, they called the period "Dark" because it was a time of stagnation in terms of secular thought, philosophy and scientific achievement. They saw men of the Middle Ages as "primitive" in much the same way they came to see cultures in Africa or South America as "primitive" – not so much for spiritual reasons, but because of a lack of worldly progress. That was the whole premise of the Enlightenment: that men were lightening the darkness by means of intellectual, philosophical, and scientific progress. There's no doubt that we've benefited from that so-called light, but the world is no less dark than it was before. We still live under the same curse that Adam brought when he committed treason against his loving Creator – when he chose to determine what was good for himself, rather than trusting in the perfect goodness of God for guidance.

If anything the world is getting darker. The Enlightenment sought "light" apart from the true light of the Gospel. It made all sorts of advancements, but divorced the intellectual from the spiritual. And so it's no wonder that the great philosophers from Nietzsche to Foucault have sought to find meaning in modern life and ended up throwing up their hands and committing

suicide or dying in despair because they saw no way through the darkness. And we're now seeing that darkness bear fruit. We've moved on from Modernism to Post-Modernism, in which there are no absolutes. We stumble around in the darkness, but don't even realise it – in fact, we're happy with the darkness and call it good.

Robert Simons, history professor at Hamilton University in Indiana illustrates just how much we've come to prefer darkness as a culture. He notes that in his classes he's never had a student deny the historicity of the Nazi holocaust, yet he finds growing numbers – he estimates about one quarter of his students – who are reluctant or refuse to make a moral judgment regarding the holocaust. They're willing to express personal distaste for what the Nazis did, but they're unwilling to say that what that government did was wrong.

Think of all those people today who campaign to save the whales or who lobby against nuclear energy, while at the same time arguing for the legalisation of abortion or euthanasia. Not long ago I was driving behind a car with two bumper stickers. One supported the SPCA and the other support legalised abortion. You wonder how someone can throw themselves into caring for orphaned or abused dogs and cats and yet be in favour of the killing of human babies. We wonder how that can be. It can be because the world is so terribly dark.

And so it's no wonder that we live in such great darkness when the culture teaches us that truth is subjective and that we have no business making value judgements about the actions of others. Virtue is whatever the individual wants and likes and the idea of sin goes no further than describing anything that keeps you personally from gratifying your desires. As we fumble around in the dark we end up, as St. Paul tells us in Romans, exchanging "the truth about God for a lie and worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25).

It was into this darkness that God raised up the Israelites, through Abraham, to be a light to the Gentile nations. God called them to be different, to follow him faithfully, as a witness to his glory, and to

be a measuring rod of what light is supposed to look like. God gave his Law through Moses – the light of the Law was meant to show the people right from wrong so that they could be the example, the light, that God had called them to be. Without an objective standard – without true light – every one of us does his own thing and calls it light. Our only standard for measuring, if we have one at all, is the light that other men and women carry.

Think of it this way. When I was in camp we'd all take a flashlight with us. And we'd lie there in our cabin at night shining our flashlights into each others' eyes, trying to see who had the brightest light. If we could draw some drapes here and turn out the lights we could all play that game now. And some of you might have a big, four-battery Maglight and other's might just have a wimpy, little light running on a AAA battery. Some of you might have a big and potentially powerful light, but the batteries are almost dead and all you'd see is its faint glow.

That's the game the Pharisees played. They sat in the darkness of the world and boasted about their four-battery Maglights and how bright they were. Sadly we sometimes play the same game. But when we do we miss the point – God's light was intended to show just how weak the most powerful of our lights is. His light is the light of sun.

And so into the darkness, St. John says, came Jesus – *The Light*. He was the light that the Law given through Moses had foreshadowed. If the Law was a big search light, Jesus came as the sun itself, and in his brightness he showed up even the biggest flashlight in the world to be just a little flicker, just a faint glow. St. John writes at the beginning of his Gospel:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. (John 1:10)

That's the really sad thing. The very light who was there with his creative power in the very beginning went unreceived and unrecognised by his creation – so enamoured of the darkness were they!

Jesus is *the* light and by comparison we're just little flashlights flickering in the

darkness of the world. But what's really remarkable here is that Jesus tells us, "You are the light of the world." YOU. Not Mr. or Mrs. Super Christian. Not just the people with the title "Saint" before their names. Not even "Christians" in some general and vague sense. No. YOU, are the light of the world.

The world goes to the great thinkers, philosophers, and scientists with life's problems but never finds any answers. Jesus is telling us that you don't have to be a rocket scientist or a great psychologist to lighten the darkness – it's the light of Christ that lightens the world, and each and every Christian reflects that light. Just as Jesus tells us that we accomplish his purpose in the world by simply being something as common and lowly as salt, now he reminds us that even the most lowly of us, through him, have what the world needs to find its way out of darkness. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. *Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*" (John 8:12).

If we are light it ultimately means that the Christian takes part in an intimate relationship with him in whom there is "no darkness at all." Understanding this is as simple as understanding Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit in John 14-16. We don't have nearly enough time to cover that long passage in detail, but essentially Jesus says there, "The result of his coming is this: My Father and I will come to live *in you*; we will be in you and you will be in us." God, who is the "the Father of lights," is the light that is in us; he is in us, and we are in him, and so Jesus can say of us as Christians, "*You are the light of the world.*"

We are not the light in and of ourselves. St. John said of John the Baptist: "He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light." The same applies to us. If Christ is the sun, we're like the moon. We produce no light of our own, but we reflect into the darkness of the world the light that he shines on us. Think also about the fact that the moon goes through phases. Sometimes it's full and shines a lot of light on the earth, sometimes it's just a thin crescent, and other times it can't be seen at all. Why? Because the earth gets in the way of the sun shining on it. Just so for us as followers of Christ. We need to be his faithful and whole-

hearted followers. If we let the world get in the way not only does less of his light reach us, but there's less of his light reflected off us onto the world. And that's our problem. Too many of us, too much of the time, make nothing more than a half-hearted "commitment" to Christ. We want the benefits of living in his Kingdom, but we aren't interested in the obligations. We continue to live more or less as we always have. We put our hobbies or our work – even our families – before God, and in the process being salt and light gets pushed to the side. Our salt becomes adulterated and our light glows dimly, if at all. And it's no wonder that Christians have little credibility with the world.

As we saw last week, salt has only purpose: to be salt. If it were to somehow lose its saltiness it would be completely and utterly useless – fit only to be thrown out in the street. So with light. It has one purpose: to lighten the darkness. In the next chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel we'll see Jesus talking about the need to remove from our lives the things that cause us to sin, because sin fills us with darkness. And he warns there, "If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:23). It raises the issue: light and darkness are antithetical. You can't be both light and dark. Just as salt that isn't salty isn't really salt, so light that isn't light, but instead is darkness, isn't really light. If you're not shining the light of Christ into the darkness of the world, you need to take a close look at yourself and ask, "Am I really following Christ?"

And so, if we are the light of the world, what does that mean for us? Jesus goes on in verse 14 and says:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 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. 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. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Think about what those words mean. If we're the light of the world, we're like a city on a hill. Today we may not grasp the full meaning of what Jesus was getting at. We live in a world of big cities and

electricity. We'd have to travel pretty far to get away from all the lights around us. Even here, on a cloudy night, we can see the lights of Vancouver distantly reflecting off the clouds. That's what the astronomers these days call "light pollution." Los Angeles is now so big and puts off so much light at night, that as far away and as high up as Palomar Mountain astronomers at the big observatory there complain that they can no longer see what they used to – because of the city lights.

The people of Jesus' day didn't know anything about "light pollution." When the sun went down, all they had to lighten the night were their fires and lamps. Imagine a traveller in those days. When the sun went down you had to stop for the night. It would have been pitch black – you couldn't follow a road. And yet a city on a hill could be seen in the distance as a beacon. Their cities weren't very big – they would have been little villages by our standards – and their lights weren't bright by any stretch of the imagination, but they shone out in the pitch blackness of a moonless night, lightening the darkness, and drawing people toward their walls.

That's what Jesus says we are. If you are a follower of Christ you are the city on the hill, shining into the pitch blackness of the world around you, guiding men and women to the place where they can find rest in the blackness. The very fact that the world, as it walks further and further away from Jesus Christ, falls into greater and greater darkness demonstrates just how much our world needs the knowledge of the Saviour. Jesus came as the light, showing the way to restored fellowship with God. He leaves that light with us. As we follow Christ, we show his light into the world, that men and women may find the way to God through Jesus Christ.

The need for light is all the more evident today in the Post-Modern world where no one wants to talk about absolutes anymore. Fifty years you could share the Gospel message with a person, and even if you weren't really living it out, that person could think about the message objectively, reasoning it out, and despite your hypocrisy, still see the merit of the message. Today we live in different times. The base assumption is sort of, "If it works for you great. I'll find what works for me." You can't share the Gospel with that kind of person if you

aren't living it yourself! If they're even going to listen they have to see it working in your life first. And so we have all the more reason to be following Christ's example. It's not enough to talk about the light – you need to *be* the light – you need to *live* the light.

That gets at Jesus' second point about light: nobody lights a lamp in the house and then puts a basket over the top of it. What's the point? Just as salt that stays in the salt-shaker does no good for anyone, light that's hidden from view is worthless. It's great to gather here together to share our light with each other, to strengthen each other, and to be refuelled by God, but it's not enough to stay in the walls of the Church. We need to go out into the world. We need to be out there where men and women can see us and where we can draw them to the light like a porchlight draws a moth.

As the Church living in a society that's increasingly intolerant of our message, we often allow ourselves to be herded into a little Christian ghetto. The government tells us what we can and can't talk about, who we can or can't marry, and all that stuff. The world out there gets angry when we start talking about sin or when we start talking about truth and absolutes. And so we're often guilty of backing away, bowing out, and retreating to our own little building where we commiserate about the evils of our society. But you see, that's Jesus' whole point. He tells us, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." The world is dark – it's evil – it's Godless. It needs him, but because he has chosen to work through us, the world needs us to point it to Christ. Just as the Jews were to be a light to the Gentiles, showing the nations around them what it means to serve God and receive his blessing, so we as Christians are called to be a light that draws the world to God through Jesus Christ. If the world gets angry with us, GOOD. That means we're fulfilling our mission. But it also means that we need to keep doing the same thing. No retreat! We need to keep being salt and light!

Jesus exhorts us to show the world what he has made us. We need to live our lives as men and women who have been given divine and eternal life. The Beatitudes aren't just a description of what our

character should be – they're a description of what Christ himself is like. He came as the light of the world and now he tells us, "Be just like me." Don't wait until you get to heaven to be like Christ – do it now and do it in the world! In the New Testament we read about Jesus and the apostles performing miracles that validated their divine message, and after those miracles, the Bible often tells us that the people who saw them, "Gave glory to God." They were amazed at what they saw and they were moved to glorify God. *You and I are to live just like that!* Every day you live out the Beatitudes, every day you live your new and renewed life in Christ by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, you shine the light of Christ into the world. The greatest miracle of all is the life of the redeemed sinner who turns to follow Christ. That's our witness to the world – to live out our new life by following the example of Christ, doing what the natural man can never succeed in doing. To make the Beatitudes a description of our character and to bear the fruit of the Spirit in our lives – that is what makes us the light of the world.

We need to live in such a way that men and women see us and ask, "What do they have? Why are they so different? Why can't I succeed in living the way they do?" so that we can share with them the only real explanation: that we are the people of God, the children of God, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ." If we can do that we can share with the world the good news that "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners," and to give men a new nature and a new life and to make them sons and daughters of God. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, YOU are the light of the world. Live as a child of the light.

Please pray with me: Our Father, you redeemed us from darkness to light through the blood of your only Son when he died on the cross. You have given us your Holy Spirit to indwell us so that we can follow Jesus' example – so that we can be the light of the world. We confess to you that we often hide our light and that we often obscure it by our worldliness. Give us the grace, Father, to remove the basket and to faithfully follow Christ so that our good works will move others to give you glory and turn to you. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.