

# Sunday 27th October 2024 - This Little Light Of Mine: Deeds Of Love

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[ 0 : 00 ] We're nearing the end of our This Little Light of Mine Sunday series that we've been doing. One more to go next week when Dave will be speaking to us. But if you've been here in recent weeks or you've listened online, my hope is I think that it's been a series which at the very least has prompted some thoughts on what it means for us to share our lives and to shine in ways which show Jesus. Living in ways that either reflect or share the goodness of God's love with those we live alongside. We're going to think a little bit this morning about how we might share the goodness of God's love. But before we get into that, I'm very aware that talking about letting our light shine and sharing the good news of God's love and so on, I appreciate for some of us. That can sound pretty daunting maybe, particularly if we were to describe that shining and that sharing as evangelism. Evangelism. It's a word, evangelism. It might be one which kind of causes us to recoil a little bit, maybe even shiver, especially if we associate evangelism with sort of shouty street preachers that just make us feel bad as we're walking past them, or those well-meaning but kind of overly intense people who desperately try to shoehorn Jesus into every conversation, you know, even if you're just talking about the weather or something, you know, did you see the sunrise this morning? Yes, I did, but let me tell you about another son who rose, that kind of thing, you know what I mean? It's all just a little bit cheesy perhaps. But really, evangelism is neither,

I think, the shouty kind of street preacher person nor the cheesy slash queasy shoehorning Jesus into every conversation kind of person because the word evangelism is rooted and essentially means good news, good news. Now, we tend traditionally to think of it as a spoken thing, you know, preaching or sharing the good news of Jesus. And there's obviously a place for that. But instead, and as we're going to hopefully unpack this morning, I'd suggest evangelism is much more to do with actually being the good news of Jesus. And why do I say that? Well, you may recall this verse from Matthew's gospel that we're kind of basing this series on in which Jesus encourages us to let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven. As we said way back in week one of this series, and according to Jesus, we let our light and the light of God's love in us shine by doing things, by doing good deeds which reveal and ultimately point to the goodness of God, which sounds great in theory, I think. But I guess it raises the question, how might what we do, you know, the way we act, point people to God, and more specifically, perhaps, to Jesus? And how does it go beyond simply being kind and caring for people so that they do end up, as this verse says, give glory to our

Father in heaven? Well, to help us consider this, I want to start by zoning in on one of the words in this verse here, the word deeds. So if we go back to the original Greek language in which the second half of the Bible, the New Testament was written in, our English word deeds is a translation of the Greek word ergon. Okay, ergon. You want to say some Greek this morning with me? A one, two, three, ergon.

Beautiful. Sounds like a toilet bleach, I think, to me, ergon. But we'll go into what it actually means. Now, this Greek word ergon, though, it's actually, I think, quite an interesting one, because it's where we get our English word ergonomic from. So you might have seen or have heard about ergonomically designed chairs or desks, you know, ones that help perhaps to reduce back pain and strain by being better suited for people's posture than sort of standard off-the-shelf ones might be. Indeed, ergonomics is all about ensuring that someone's surroundings fit their needs rather than simply telling someone that they need to fit into their surroundings and make do with an uncomfortable chair or whatever. I'll say that again. Ergonomics is all about ensuring someone's surroundings fit their needs rather than expecting them to fit in to their surroundings.

It's the opposite, if you like, of kind of corner cutting of saying, that'll do. That's not ergonomics at all. Instead, ergonomics is all about taking an intentional, considerate, kind of bespoke, personal approach to someone's needs. Ergonomics with chairs or computers or whatever says, okay, where are you hurting? What isn't working for you with how we're doing this? And tries to offer answers that can really benefit someone's whole well-being. And this idea of ergonomics, I'd suggest it's an interesting principle to think about when it comes to sharing our faith and letting our good deeds shine before others. So do we, for example, simply do what we do and expect people to fit in, a kind of one-size-fits-all approach? Or do we adapt and adjust what we offer according to and in response to people's specific situations so that they might discover the good news of God's love in their own way and for themselves? See, I'd suggest it's that. It's the second of these approaches. I guess if you want to think about it, we could call it ergonomic evangelism. I'm not sure that phrase will catch on, but that's what I would describe it as, ergonomic evangelism. That can actually be, I think, a key way in which people might not only see the light of our good deeds, but come ultimately to give glory to God. So what might this more bespoke approach to shining our light and sharing our faith look like?

[ 7 : 02 ] Well, if we go back to this ergon, deeds word, there's something noticeable, I think, about the way in which it's used in the Bible, and in particular, in the four gospel accounts of Jesus's life.

So for example, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, first three gospels, this word ergon in the Greek deeds in our English language, sometimes translated as works as well, but this word ergon, it appears on 10 occasions between these three gospels, six times in Matthew, twice in Mark, and twice in Luke, 10 times in total. But then when we read John's gospel, it appears 27 times in total, nearly three times as much in just John's gospel as there is in the other three gospels combined. John's gospel then, when we read through it, we'll notice, is big on deeds and actions in putting the ways of God into practice. So for example, it's in John's gospel, and actually John's gospel alone, that we read about some of Jesus's most practical miracles or actions, including Jesus turning water into wine or raising Lazarus from the dead, of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, or then cooking them breakfast on the beach. Jesus, in John's gospel, particularly models for us and champions in others all sorts of good deeds, you know, championing, if you like, a very hands-on way of doing things God's way. But if you notice, with each of these four examples, these four events, Jesus is very much aware of and responding to the specific practical or emotional needs of those he's living alongside, something which is sometimes perhaps easy to overlook if we're familiar or overly familiar, perhaps, with these passages. So for example, if we take when Jesus turns water into wine, first miracle that Jesus performs in John's gospel. When Jesus changes water into wine, we can sort of think about it super spiritually, if you like. Yes, it's a sign of how Jesus has come to challenge what was the old system of ceremonial washing about who's in and who's out. And so in the story, Jesus kind of repurposes these massive stone water jars that were used to help people feel clean before God. He says, that's not how it works. We don't need to use them for that. Instead, let me change that ceremonial water into wine that we can drink because I'm giving you a new way of thinking about God based on generosity and hospitality and welcome and joy, the new wine, if you like, of God's kingdom. But it's also worth remembering, he's also at a wedding. There's a practical side to it as well because the host of the wedding has had a social boo-boo and run out of wine when he's meant to be providing for all his guests. So in order to not be socially embarrassed, Jesus recognizes and responds to the practical need of their need to be wine at this wedding. It's one example. Think about when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. I like the casting in this particular thing. He looks like he's been dead four days there, doesn't he? Oh, Lazarus. Bit of colour in your cheeks, my man.

Yes. But this raising of Lazarus, yeah, it's a sign that God is bigger than death and it points to a resurrection which through Jesus is on offer to us all. But it's also an event in which Jesus' compassion for those who are grieving is in full view. We're told Jesus weeps, weeps it seems, in empathy with the devastation that Lazarus' family felt. Yes, he raises Lazarus from the dead, but practically, emotionally, there's truth in this way that Jesus interacts with people as well.

Equally, when Jesus washes his disciples' feet, again, just in John's gospel, yes, it's an example of humble service and a sign of the self-giving love that Jesus would soon embody on the cross.

[ 11 : 44 ] But it's also a recognition of a practical need in that his friend's feet were probably filthy. And Jesus is saying, nah, come on, let me gently, tenderly wash your feet clean for you in a very practical way. And then similarly, when Jesus, just a little while later after he comes back to life from

the cross, when Jesus cooks his disciples breakfast on the beach, yes, it's an opportunity, as we read in John's gospel, for Jesus to offer forgiveness and reassurance to Peter here on the right. Reassurance that once Peter had denied Jesus, actually Jesus was saying, nah, come on, come on, we can do this together again. So there's that element to this breakfast. But it's also practical because these disciples have been out all evening and all night fishing, so they'd be hungry. So Jesus thinking, let me meet your practical needs in a loving way as well, and decides to cook for them.

So do you see, perhaps with these four, there are all sorts of other examples throughout the gospels, but in John's gospel in particular, you know, we see the deeds, the ergon of Jesus highlighted in ways which kind of merge seamlessly the practical and what we might call the spiritual side of life into one whole life affirming act. Jesus recognises a need, a need which is good to address and meet in and of itself. But out of that practical action, a deeper truth is also on offer, the truth of God's generosity, God's compassion, God's service, and God's hope.

And it's this, I would suggest, which is part of this idea of ergonomic evangelism, you know, good news, which intentionally seeks to respond to the practical situations of those in need, but which is also rooted in a knowledge that God is present and working through and offering a deeper truth within those acts of kindness. So if we think about our situation here, that's why, for example, we put on the Christmas lunch, as we will be doing in a couple of months' time, for dozens of folks who would otherwise be on their own on Christmas Day. That's why, a couple of months back, we cooked, what, over 1,700 burgers and hot dogs and gave them away at this summer's play in the parks next door.

That's why this week, I've spent a lot of time applying for and thankfully getting grants from our local Litchfield district councillors to ensure that the war memorial outside will be cleaned and looking as good as new, hopefully, in time for Remembrance Sunday in a couple of weeks' time.

That's why, for example, we host and run things like watercolour dabblers. You know, these and many other things that we offer, they're good things, they're good deeds in and of themselves because at the very least, but importantly on a practical level, they're meeting people's needs for community or for food, for civic pride or for creativity. And those things, these things, again, in and of themselves are beautiful, I'd say godly things to do. But at the same time, all of our good deeds as a church, we hope, are rooted in God and resourced by God and routinely refreshed by the conversations and the care that flow from them. Conversations and care in which we can share with people through our actions and where appropriate through our words that what we do and why we do it is because we love them. We love them because God loves them. And we're simply trying to offer a glimpse of the fullness of life and build the kind of community that God longs for each of us to know. It's not, in all that we do, it's not, and I do want to emphasize this, it's not that these good deeds are simply a means to an end, you know, an attempt to sow seeds of faith or have the opportunity to give someone the gospel. No. If they were all part of a covert kind of spiritual strategy for people who walk through our doors, that would make them a thoroughly dishonest endeavor because it would invite people here under false pretenses. It would treat people as projects to persuade, not as people to welcome and love. And actually, if we treat them as projects, well, it robs us of the joy that comes from genuinely being in and belonging to and receiving from a wider community.

[ 17 : 08 ] Instead, it's that inner course, I would say, of doing everyday life and inviting other people to join us on our journey through it. But it would be equally dishonest if we weren't willing or wanting to share the good news of God with people. For example, when I go to the pub, which I do occasionally, I'm simply going to the pub because I love going to the pub. I love pubs. I love pubs. I'm going to watch the football. I'm going to see friends. I'm going to relax. I've got no other agenda than that.

But when I'm in a pub and there's an opportunity to share what I believe and why, of course I'm going to take it. Because Jesus means the world to me in a way that I want everyone else to be able to experience for themselves. And yet, in my experience, it's precisely because I go to the pub without looking to shoehorn the gospel in that I end up having all sorts of conversations and encounters with people about God and faith. Because it's simply part and parcel of who I am, it kind of spills out like a pint might spill over, that kind of thing. Now, yes, I understand, you know, I am the local vicar. And so when I go into a pub, often people know what I do. And that can sometimes put me in a privileged position in terms of people's openness. And often they come to me. I don't have

to strike up conversations with them. It does mean I get an awful lot of Mickey taking as well. But you take the rough with the smooth on that. But as Kim was saying the other week when she was in the police force, you know, in response to the usual questions that people would ask, you know, what you've been up to at the weekend, she'd always say that her weekend included going to church. You know, not as a holier-than-now thing, but just simply because it's part and parcel of her life that spills out in conversation. I mean, think for a moment where it is for you that you regularly bump into and spend time with people who maybe aren't churchy, who aren't Christians. Could be at work, could be at college, could be at the gym or the school run, could be your wider family circle, could be different friends that you hook up with, could be a social club or a community group somewhere you volunteer, you know, all sorts of possibilities. Try and think about somewhere where you bump into and hang out with non-Christians. And I guess if we're struggling to think of somewhere, that's possibly something to think about for us, how we spend our time.

But for most of us, wherever it is, it's hopefully a given that our faith will naturally shape the way that we speak and the way that we share in those contexts. And it's that natural, normal, everyday reality which I'd suggest God can work most effectively through. For example, my place, as I say, is the pub. And when I'm there, if someone says something that I think is out of order, I might challenge that by following, I think it's Brian McLaren's advice, the way he says to challenge things that we disagree with, by gently responding in conversation and saying, do you know what, I see things a bit differently than that. I see things differently.

And that usually opens up again, in my experience, opens up rather than shuts down a chance to say why you think things differently. Not getting into an argument, but simply to offer a different voice.

And as the conversation flows, hopefully a faith-filled voice into their thinking. Or equally, if someone shares about something difficult or tragic that they're going through, I do my best to listen and to empathize. And that sense of empathy usually prompts me to acknowledge with them that what they're going through sucks. That it really sucks. It's rotten.

[ 21 : 43 ] Now the temptation in those moments when you've said, oh, that's really hard, that sucks. The temptation in those moments might be to try and offer some kind of hope, you know, but, and sometimes that's appropriate, maybe, but more often than not, I find that it's the willingness to be with someone in their pain. Perhaps if we want to say to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with them, that God seems to be able to use and be more present in than moving on too quickly to the hope. I mean, over time, if not on that occasion, then on future times that we talk, there's usually a chance to talk about hope. But only, I think, because the reality of the present pain they're going through has first been genuinely heard and genuinely shared.

Now, I don't always get these sort of pub conversations right. There are numerous times when I'm not my best self, shall we say. And to be honest, there have been times when someone wants to get all deep and meaningful, and I'd much rather just watch the football and it's like, oh, I'm just going to relax today, that kind of thing. But my hope is that this approach for me and for us, whether it's us as individuals, when we're hanging out with different people, whether it's for us as a church within our wider community, my hope is that by living as normal, as generous, as kind, and as faith-filled a life as possible, my hope, and indeed my experience over the years, is that God honours our willingness to let our light shine by drawing people to himself through the honest conversations and the considered care that we're trying to share.

I guess what I'm trying to say in all this is that in all our desire for other people to experience the good news of God's love for themselves, then we can trust that loving them, that love is enough. And why can I say that? Well, because as we looked at last week, the Bible tells us, in what is probably my favourite passage of all, that God is love. But what's more, it doesn't stop there. The next bit says, and whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them. In this way, love is made complete among us. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them.

[ 24 : 30 ] I mean, just think about those words for a moment. Almost kind of breathe them in. Whoever lives in love lives in love.

Whoever lives in love. That's an extraordinary truth, I think. One that kind of messes a bit with any kind of systematic theologies you might have about who's in and who's out, who's saved or not. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them. And in this way, love is made complete among us.

No wonder Jesus can say this, that by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

I think that's what I mean when I say we can trust in love, in the power and the presence of love. That we can trust for love to be the means by which our light shines so that others may see our good deeds and come to give glory to our Father in heaven.

[ 25 : 43 ] And what is love? To quote 90s mystic Hadaway, well, love, I'd suggest, is therefore not so much a noun as it is a verb.

Love, I would say, first and foremost, is a doing word. A word that only makes sense when it's put into action. Good deeds, bespoke deeds, intentional deeds, considerate deeds, ergonomic deeds, all deeds done in love.

And so, to conclude, I wonder for you, and in what context and in what way, might you be able to show love, to do love, to be love this week?

Think about what you've got coming up. Think about the kind of places you hang out. Think about the people you meet. In what ways might you need to deepen, might I need to deepen our trust in love?

Love, which as we're told by the Apostle Paul, is even greater than hope and even greater than faith. And I wonder who it might be that the God who is love might be leading us to this week.

[ 27 : 08 ] You know, someone might be able to let your light shine before so that they may see your good deeds, your lovingly good deeds, and in time, through that relationship you have with them, come to understand and give glory to their Father in heaven.

And as we perhaps ponder those questions, and perhaps as we think through anything else that's come to mind this morning, I just want to play to close a very gentle, simple song by a guy called John Mayer.

It's a song called Love is a Verb. Love is a doing word. So as this song plays, and it's only a couple of minutes long, I'd invite us maybe just to use its simplicity as a prayer, as a soundtrack perhaps to our thoughts with God, and let's use these moments perhaps to ask God to show us ways in which we might do love and be love as we share the good news of God's love this week.

Love is a verb.

It ain't a thing. It's not something you hold. It's not something you scream. When you show me love I don't need your words Yeah, love ain't a thing Love is a verb Love ain't a thing Love is a verb Love ain't a verb Love ain't a verb Love ain't a verb It ain't an excuse Love is a verb No, you can't get through love No, you can't get through love No, you can't get through love I'm just a pile of IOUs

[ 29 : 35 ] Love ain't a drug Despite what you've heard Yeah, love ain't a thing Love is a verb Love ain't a thing Love ain't a verb Love ain't a verbör blues Love ain't a verb Love ain't a verb Love ain't a thing Love ain't a verb Love ain't a thing Love ain't a thing Love ain't a thing Love ain't a verb Love ain't Love ain't a verb Show me that love is a verb.

You gotta show me that love is a verb.

Love is a man.