

Sunday 15th September 2024 - This Little Light Of Mine: Let Your Light Shine

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Date: 15 September 2024

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] As the screen suggests, we are starting a new Sunday series this morning called This Little Light of Mine. Words which may provoke memories of the old spiritual song, you know, This Little Light of Mine.

I'm not going to sing it this morning, it's a bit croaky, but yeah, you sing it better than I do. Well done, well done. I guess this whole song and this series really is about living life God's way, you know, displaying qualities of kindness and illuminating this life with love, glowing, if you like, with the goodness of God.

And indeed, this is a song which draws directly on the teaching of Jesus when he says this as part of what's known as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus said this, he said, And I guess on one level, we might understand this Little Light of Mine song, and in particular, the Bible verse that it comes from, as being all about the way in which the Spirit of God fills us with God's light.

You know, light, which enables us to see the right ways to live and to do these good deeds, so that others may see that light, that goodness, as a pointer to the glory of the God who is behind it all.

[1 : 28] And so, in this kind of understanding, we might see ourselves as a mirror, and we might think of God's light as being like a torch, and then our job as a mirror is to reflect that light.

And it can be dazzling when you reflect the light of God. I won't do that too much because you'll have black marks on your eyes all morning. But yeah, that's the idea, it seems, of us being a mirror.

You know, we are not the light. Our job, though, is to humbly, obediently reflect God's light and God's love in our lives to the world, to the glory, to the credit, if you like, of God.

And that's an idea which ties in with what Jesus says elsewhere when he announces this of himself. He says, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

So we can see ourselves as channels, as reflectors of God's light through the way we live. And I think that's legit, and it's a perfectly fine way to understand this verse.

[2 : 40] And indeed, it's a helpful exercise, perhaps, to think about how we might reflect God's love to the wider world. And yet, if we go back to this verse, you'll notice something, I'm sure.

Jesus doesn't seem that he has this idea of reflection, reflecting God's light in mind. He doesn't say, let my light shine before others.

Now, instead, he says, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds as a way of bringing glory to God.

Which is a significant idea to think about. Not so much that we are a mirror reflecting God's light, but that we are the light ourselves.

Let your light, let our light shine. And in fact, this idea, I think it ties in with something else Jesus says. Just a couple of verses before this verse here in Matthew.

[3 : 46] Because Jesus says this, he says, you, you know, we, are the light of the world. And he continues, a town built on a hill cannot be hidden, neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl instead.

If we get a little lamp here like they used in Jesus' time. You light a lamp and you put it on a stand, because then it gives light to the whole house.

In the same way, says Jesus, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Now, why might the distinction between us simply being a mirror, you know, and reflecting God's light, why might that distinction between us being a mirror or in fact becoming or being a light ourselves, why might that be important in our understanding of this verse?

Well, it seems to me that in saying that we are the light of the world and in calling us to let our light shine before others, Jesus is affirming us as people capable of shining in our own unique way.

[5 : 11] We're not just meant to be mirrors, you know, impersonal, passive reflectors of God's light. No, instead, it seems Jesus is saying here, look, I see you, I see you, the light that's in your life.

You've got something unique to offer here. So I want you to shine with your light for me. Shine with your character, your personality, your approach.

Embrace, if you like, the person that I've made you to be. Let your light shine. Do the good deeds that only you can do because it's that which is glorifying to the God who made you and loves you as you are.

And so if we think about it, this call from Jesus to let our light shine, it's pretty remarkable, really, I think, because it's such an affirming picture of the way Jesus sees us.

It's not that we are simply reflectors of God's goodness, but that we, that you and that I are people with an inherent worth and value, people championed by a God who loves us, not for what we do, but for who we are.

[6 : 33] How can we be sure of that kind of perception of us, of God? Well, it's interesting, this passage about letting your light shine and Jesus' sermon on the mount as a whole, it follows in Matthew's gospel, hot on the heels of Jesus being affirmed by his heavenly father in just the same kind of radically loving way.

So a couple of chapters before these verses in Matthew's gospel, we read the story of Jesus being baptized. And as part of that baptism, you may recall it, we're told that a voice comes from heaven saying, this is my son whom I love, with him I am well pleased.

Now, this in Matthew's gospel, it comes really early on in Jesus' public life. So we haven't read about, we haven't seen Jesus do anything that we would think is worth shouting about.

No healings, no miracles, no teaching and so on. And yet I think that's the point because his heavenly father loves him and is so pleased, so proud of Jesus simply for who he is that God can't help but publicly declare his love and his pleasure and joy in him.

And so this experience of Jesus's, of knowing the love of his heavenly father in such an unconditional, affirming way, I think it sets the tone for the rest of Jesus' ministry because it stays with him because when a couple of chapters later, when Jesus is talking about us letting our light shine.

[8 : 21] Well, what other idea does Jesus introduce in this verse? Well, this is the first time that Jesus uses this father term for God in relation not just to himself, but in relation to his disciples and by turn in relation to us.

Jesus says God is not just his father, but he's your father. He's our father, as he would pray. Which means, I think, that just as Jesus was affirmed by his heavenly father without needing to do anything, so too we are loved by this same heavenly father in the same way.

Which again, if we think about it, is the most beautiful picture of how God relates to us and how we are to relate to God. You know, by sharing his father with us, Jesus understands that the light in our lives brings glory, it brings pleasure, it brings joy to God in the same way that a parent delights in seeing their child grow and the way their character, you know, their gifts, their humour, their ability to love and so on.

Well, for a parent, for a grandparent, for an aunt and uncle, when you see that child grow, their kind of presence lights up the room with us. It's like God the Father says to us, yes, my son, yes, my daughter, you go for it, I'm so proud of you, come on, you got this, you got this.

You know, and what's more, we're talking about God's glory. I kind of imagine God the Father's face lighting up as the light of our good deeds shines on him overseeing us.

[10 : 15] Yes, of course, God alone has given us the life in the first place and the power and the spirit to be able to shine in any way. You know, God is the oil in our lamp, God is the battery in our torch, but I wonder if that's partly what glorifying God actually means, that God's face shines with the beauty of the goodness that the spirit brings out of us as God's children loved by their heavenly Father.

That, I would suggest, is the kind of picture that Jesus is painting here of who God is and who we are in relation to him. Now, as well as it being an indication perhaps of the way God feels about us, I think the other side of this talk of letting our light shine and so on is the way in which we're called to help others to get to know this same God of love for themselves.

You know, through letting our light shine, the hope is perhaps that we enable other people to see the goodness that's on offer and so, in turn, says Jesus, they may come to glorify God the Father themselves.

It talks about these good deeds as being the way that happens. What might these good deeds be that ultimately point people and glorify God? Well, we've looked at this word good in this context before because in the original Greek language in which this passage was written, the word used for good here is the Greek word kalos and kalos in Greek means a kind of beautiful good in the same way that a flame is beautiful.

It's that kind of light, that kind of deed that we're talking about, something that's captivating and attractive, something that we can't help but be drawn towards.

[12 : 23] What kind of good deeds then might be beautiful that people are drawn to? Well, I'd say whether it's the carer who lovingly washes and dresses their bed-bound relative, whether it's the teacher who recognizes the worth in a boy whose parents don't seem to have much time for, whether it's the person who pays for the stranger's shopping that they're struggling to afford, whether it's the child who intentionally befriends the new kid in their class who's just arrived from overseas, these are all beautifully good acts.

Whether it's the giving of time to volunteer at a food bank, whether it's the attentive listening to a colleague who has no one else to celebrate their joys and their sorrows with, whether it's the offer to hold a baby so that a mum can go to the toilet on her own, whether it's the gift of a meal voucher so that an unemployed son can treat his mum to a meal out together, these are all beautifully good acts.

Whether it's reassuring the woman that no matter what she's been told in the past, God doesn't define her as a sinner in need of repentance, but as a child who always has a room in his house.

Whether it's telling the man who works too hard and drinks too much, that God sees the lack of affirmation he received growing up and longs to help him find freedom from that pain.

Whether it's inviting the transgender person who has constantly faced rejection to instead play a full and active part in the life of a worshipping community, I'd say these are all beautifully good acts.

[14 : 10] The source, the battery, the oil, the inspiration for these beautifully good acts, these movingly beautiful acts.

Yes, it's God's spirit, but these good deeds, these are ways in which your light, says Jesus, your choices, your acts, your gestures, your decisions can shine out.

Yes, of course, seek my spirit to guide and enable you to have the love, the patience, the gentleness that you need to do these acts. But, says Jesus, I'm entrusting you and equipping you with my spirit so that you can go out into all the world and make disciples because surely I am with you always.

And that, I would suggest, is what makes this light-bearing life with Jesus so exciting because he gives us the freedom and the ability to improvise and to innovate and to imagine the whole host of ways in which we can shine light into otherwise dark situations.

And so, I wonder for you, think about your context, your friends, your family, your work, your home. I wonder for you, in what ways might we be able to shine our light this week?

[15 : 41] The light that God enables us to shine, yes, but how might we shine our specific light into those situations this week? What beautifully good acts might we be able to do?

How might we be good news, if you like, for people this week? And I guess as we think about this, you might be thinking, okay, fair enough.

I get the idea of this being a practical, personal way of displaying God's goodness to people. That makes sense. But the flip side is, what about explicitly telling people about Jesus, about why Jesus died on the cross, about sin and judgment, about the need for repentance and all that?

Surely that has to come. It can't just be actions. You'd have thought it has to be communicating something of the gospel to people in that way. And I think that's a legit question, because a common view, I think, of what it means for us to share our faith, for us to let our light shine or to give someone the gospel, it's nearly always assumed to involve us sharing what we believe.

For example, I remember when I was growing up, I was taught that in order to give someone the good news of Jesus, it's as easy as A, B, C, D.

[17 : 09] So you tell them that they need to admit, first of all, that they're a sinner in need of forgiveness. Next up, we're told that they're to believe in Jesus that through his death and resurrection, God is able to forgive their sins.

The C is all about considering the cost of what it means to follow Jesus, the change in priorities that that will involve. And in a D, that's about decision time, to actually make a decision and invite Jesus into your heart as Lord and Savior.

That A, B, C, D, certainly when I was growing up, that's a kind of textbook understanding of what the good news is, what the gospel is, a way to be saved, saved from eternal damnation or whatever awaits us if we don't make that decision at the end of it, which always felt a little bit of a carrot and stick approach to things, to say the least, as opposed to being overwhelmingly good news.

And yet, when we actually look at the life of Jesus, it's interesting, he spends very little time, actually, talking about who he is and very little time about what we should believe about him.

Instead, Jesus simply invites people to follow him, to go through life with him and his ways as their guide.

[18 : 41] Why? Well, it seems that it's through the following that people can best come to a deeper understanding of and a faith in who God is.

I'd suggest Jesus' focus, therefore, is on what faith in God and in God's goodness looks like in practice.

So, if we think about Jesus' greatest hits, his Sermon on the Mount, it's full, not particularly of what you need to believe about Jesus. Instead, it's full of advice and guidance on ways to live, to be generous with money, to not judge other people, to not worry about possessions, to forgive others, to pray, to fast, to be honest, to be wise.

It's about looking out for the poor, for those in need, and finding ways to live alongside those who we find most difficult to love. In this big sermon of Jesus, there is no altar call at the end, calling people to come forward and give their lives to God.

There is no praying a prayer of commitment in order to be saved. Instead, it seems the good news of Jesus is about living in the light of God's love for us.

[20 : 03] It's a very practical, worked out kind of faith, which is in many ways, I think, often quite different to the usual understanding of what it means for someone to become a Christian in that ABCD kind of way.

For example, I had a short but interesting conversation the other week when someone came up to me here after a service and said, do you know what, we've got some new people who've joined our church over recent months, which is great.

I think we could really do, they said, with putting on a course to make sure that people coming to our church know the basics of our faith.

And this person, I've known them for a long time and I like them, and they were asked in a very caring and genuine way. And I knew they meant it would be good for us to maybe put on some kind of alpha course or something, a course which explains maybe the story of the Bible, explains the theology of God, God, and then having given people that information, invites them to respond by becoming a Christian.

And yes, I guess that's one way to think about people exploring what we might call the basics of our faith. Again, not too dissimilar to that ABCD way of what it means perhaps to share the gospel.

[21 : 25] But in this conversation with this person, I was feeling a little bit mischievous, I think, because I said in response to their suggestion about running a basics course, I said, yeah, that's interesting.

I wonder though for you, what would you say the basics of our faith are? And I asked them to have a think and then to have a chat again soon.

Now, I haven't had the chance to follow up that conversation so I don't know what the person would define the basics of our faith as. But I intentionally asked that question. Because I think there's a risk perhaps in talking about the basics of our faith, that we can reduce God and reduce our relationship with God to being primarily about a set of beliefs, you know, a creed or a statement of faith in that kind of intellectual, albeit heartfelt, understanding of how God and us fit together.

I'm not knocking the importance of working out what we actually believe. If you know me at all, you know I love having a good theological discussion and there's real value in wrestling with the Bible and how this God stuff works.

But if we were to return to what Jesus says and tells us to do, to let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven, then the focus is on light as deeds, not as beliefs.

[23 : 04] Seems to me, therefore, and this is a theme that I think may well run through this series we're doing, that the best way to share our faith is simply by living it out, to let the light of the beautiful deeds God empowers us to do shine in such a way that other people think, whoa, there's something different in you, there's something different going on here.

And when they think in that way, then we say, yeah, do you want to join me on that journey of working out what that is? And that means that sharing our faith is something we can all do in our own way, with our own light.

we may not be able to explain it all in words, but we can all love in ways which draw others closer to the God of love.

But one final thing, and just as this series slide illustrates, we're not alone in this light bearing. Now we're all part of this grid, part of this church, this community of lights.

We've each got a light to offer. which means I think that slowly but surely, as a church, through the events we put on, through groups, through services, through friendships, through teaching, through worship, through prayer, through the Bible, through testimonies, through our giving, through encouragement, through generosity, through forgiveness, through the spirit working in each of us, our journey can become one which increasingly follows the way and the person of Jesus.

[24 : 50] following Jesus is what I would define a Christian as. That's what I suggest it means for us to shine this little light of mine in our lives, to love in such a way that people can see our good deeds and in time glorify our Father in heaven.

Amen. Amen.