

"Light"

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[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Matthew chapter 5? That's page 760, 760 in the Pew Bible. This fall, we are continuing our journey through the Sermon on the Mount to learn what it means to follow Jesus and to be distinctively Christian.

What does it mean to really follow Christ, to be His church, to be His disciples? Well, Jesus teaches us that right here in Matthew 5 through 7. We're returning to verses 13 through 16 of Matthew chapter 5. Last week, Pastor Matt unpacked what it means to be the salt of the earth.

Today, we're looking at the second half of that paragraph where Jesus says, you are the light of the world. So let me pray, and then I'll read again verses 13 through 16. Father, we ask for you to be making yourself and your word clear and understandable, not just to our minds this morning, but to our hearts and to our wills. Lord, we want to be whole people, holy following you. We know that we need your help, your grace to do just that. So help us now as we come to your word. Would you give us clarity and would you give us conviction as we consider what you're saying to us again this morning? Help us to see Christ most of all, our Savior, the light of the world. In His name we pray. Amen. All right, Matthew 5, 13 through 16.

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It's no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

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. I think it's worth remembering that the early Christian movement was small.

[2:35] Yes, the crowds were growing at this point in Jesus' ministry, but the disciples, the followers of Jesus at this point, were not many in number, and they were not wealthy or powerful or all that influential. Doubts must have persisted among the earliest disciples whether their little band of men and women could make any difference. What difference could a handful of fishermen, a reformed tax collector, an ex-zealot, and a couple dozen other rural Galilean peasants make in the cold, hard world? The Roman Empire, now there was power. Its military had conquered the world.

The religious establishment in Jerusalem, now there was influence. When they spoke, people listened. What difference could this small band of Jesus' followers make in a world like that?

Now, from where we sit today, we know a bit of how the story turned out, don't we? The disciples turned the world upside down with the message of the risen Jesus, and history shows us how Christianity shaped the very warp and woof of our culture, of Western civilization, for example. For those of us in the West, we can't really think about things like justice or education or government or law without inevitably depending on the Christian tradition, even if we don't even realize it. By the way, if you're interested in learning more about that, there's a book by a guy named Tom Holland called *Dominion*, which is a really interesting account of that. But even if we sit in a different place after 2,000 years of history, I think we can still often feel very similar to those first disciples, can't we?

We can still feel doubts about whether or not we can make a real difference in the world. What influence or impact can we really have?

Some of this doubt comes when we look at the world. The problem seems so great. The darkness seems so dark. Some of this doubt comes when we look at ourselves. We see our own flaws, our own limitations, the older we get. The older we get, we see our own inconsistencies, our own shortcomings, the gnawing cynicism that grows the older you get. What difference can we possibly make?

[5:09] But in our text today, Jesus looks at his disciples. Yes, small in number. Yes, neither wealthy nor powerful nor significant by the world's standards. He looks at his disciples, a bit doubtful. They're a bit afraid. He looks at them, looks at us, and he says, you, you are the light of the world.

Let that sink in. You, Christian, you are the light of the world.

Is that how you think of yourself? Or do you squeeze yourself into the world's mold? Do you think of yourself only as what you can produce, only what you achieve, only how you compare to what you see in marketing and in social media? Or do you see yourself the way Jesus sees you?

You are the light of the world. Now, think with me for a minute. What does light do? What does light do?

Now, immediately we think, wow, light dispels darkness. And yes, that's true. But what does it do after it dispels darkness? You wake up early in the morning, you see the sunrise, and yes, the darkness is dispelled. But then what?

[6:42] What does the light do? The light brings out the color in everything. You see the green of the trees. You see the white of the clouds. The world comes to life with color.

This is something I learned from Beth, my wife, who was trained as a painter. Light can play and shift in a thousand different ways and bring out the richness of what's right before your eyes.

And Jesus says, Christian, you are the light of the world. You bring out what's possible, what's latent, what's hidden. You make brilliant the world around you.

You are not your job or your grades or your bank account or your marital status. You are light.

But your very existence in Christ is a thing of beauty that brings out the beauty in the world around you. You're a redeemed child of God.

[7:51] Notice in this paragraph, Jesus calls God our Father. Now, that's the first time in Matthew's gospel when Jesus does that, and it won't be the last. But that idea takes us right to the heart of the gospel.

How is it that we are the light of the world? I mean, come on, that's a little much, isn't it? The light of the world? I mean, at best, like, maybe I'm a candle in my living room, right?

But the light of the world? Yes. The light of the world. How? How can that be? Because of what God has done in the gospel for you and me.

See, the truth of the matter is, at one time, you and I dwelled not in light but in darkness. A little earlier in chapter 4, Matthew quotes the prophet Isaiah. When Jesus begins his ministry, when he began his ministry in Galilee, that was the fulfillment of what Isaiah had said hundreds of years earlier, that people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light.

You see, what Isaiah is describing there is what's... That's what's true of all of us in our sinful condition in Adam. We dwell in darkness. We're in a region of shadow and death where we didn't know God.

[9:13] And the gods we thought we knew were idols of our own making. But this is the good news. Into our dark and sinful state, light has dawned.

Jesus came into our darkness. In love, he pursued us into the region of shadow and death. In the incarnation, the light entered the darkness, and as John 1 says, the darkness did not overcome it.

But here's the really shocking thing about what Christ has done about the gospel. The true light came into the world, and though the darkness could not overcome it, the true light was willing to be plunged into darkness for us.

At the cross, the Son of God died. And what happened? Do you remember? Remember, the sky turned dark at midday. The light willingly went into darkness so that those living in darkness could come into the light.

And not just come into the light, but become light. You see, when Christ rose on the third day, he accomplished the complete and utter forgiveness of sins and the spiritual regeneration, the rebirth of all who believe in him.

[10:30] Through faith, we're united to the one who said, I am the light of the world. And united to Jesus, the light of the world, we now become light.

Through the Holy Spirit, God dwells in us. We're partakers of the divine nature. We've come out of darkness and into his marvelous light, as Peter says, or as Paul says in Ephesians 5, you've become light.

So, friend, are you in Christ this morning? Have you given your life to him? Have you confessed that he is Lord and God?

Do you know his grace, his free forgiveness, willingly purchased for you at the cross? Do you know his unbreakable life, demonstrated in the resurrection? Have you surrendered to his love?

If so, then you are what Jesus says you are. Because Christ is in you, and you are in him, you are the light of the world.

[11:37] That's what's most true about you. What's most true about you is not your past, not your flaws and failures, not your family history. Because of Jesus, you are the light of the world.

Yes, you and I are imperfect. Yes, we are flawed. But the light of Christ shines through you because he's willed it to be so. What he promised through the prophets, what he began in his incarnation, what he accomplished in his death and resurrection, what he announced at Pentecost by the pouring out of his spirit through the apostles, he's now chosen to continue to advance through you.

You're the light of the world. Christ is in you, the radiant hope of glory. You are the brilliance that will dispel the darkness and bring out the beauty around you.

I know that sounds hard to believe. I know we doubt it. But it's what Jesus says. And if the risen Lord has said it, then it must be true.

Okay, let's go back to where we began. Our doubts, our anxieties about whether Christians can make any difference in the world. Can we, our little band of Christians, make any difference in the world?

[13:08] It's almost the wrong question. Jesus says, you're the light of the world. You may feel small or insignificant, but by your very existence, you're bringing light into the darkness.

You are the sun rising on a world in darkness. The church is the advance rays of the coming day. The first beams of sunlight breaking over the horizon, announcing that the sun will soon rise.

And the earth will be bathed in light. It's not a question of whether Christians can make any difference in the world. The very existence of the church is evidence that God's gospel is making a difference in the world.

That the world is swept up in His plan of redemption. And it is coming to fulfillment in His time. So Christian, you are the light of the world.

Embrace this truth with all the dignity and all the hope that it's meant to give. And let your light shine. That's the responsibility that we have, by the way.

[14:15] Jesus says it right here in verse 16. You are the light of the world. Now, let your light shine. But how do we do that?

How do we live into this identity that we have as the light of the world? What does letting our light shine look like? How do we apply this great truth? Well, I think there are three things that this text points us to.

How do we let our light shine? And I think we see here that we do it corporately, and we do it practically, and we do it doxologically. So, that's the outline of the sermon.

If you're wondering, where is this sermon going? You're the light of the world, so let your light shine corporately, practically, and doxologically. Okay, first, shine corporately. You know, up to this point, as we've been thinking about this, it would be easy to take everything we've said about being the light of the world in a strictly individualistic sense.

But we must not do that. The dignity of the gospel does reach to each of us personally, but it's not individualistic. It doesn't stop at the individual.

[15:24] Jesus doesn't say, you are the lights of the world, as if we're just sort of a collection of individuals. He says, you, plural, are the light of the world. You're part of a body, a movement.

You are part of the church. We need to think not just individually, but corporately. We let our light shine first and foremost in our life together.

I think Jesus again makes this point in his first illustration. He says, a city on a hill cannot be hidden. A city is a corporate identity. We shine together as God's church, and then it becomes unmistakable.

Unmistakable. The greatest thing that the church can do to influence the world is to be the church. If in our life together we embodied joyful obedience to God's commands, if in our life together we demonstrated the love, the forgiveness, the generosity, the courage, the truthfulness that Jesus calls us to demonstrate, then we would be as unmistakable as a city on a hill.

And as weary travelers around us dwelling in darkness work their way through the valleys, they just might see that city shining forth as a place of refuge and rest in a place of safety and warmth and welcome, and they'll want to come inside.

[17:07] You see, a healthy church is the best hope for a hurting world. So as we let our light shine, we must shine it corporately. But second, we have to let it shine practically.

What is it that people see when they see our light shining? Well, in verse 16, Jesus says, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works. The church should be known for its practical love and not just for those inside the church, love for those outside the church as well.

Who lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, Jesus asked in verse 15. Of course, the answer is nobody. Nobody does that, right? Nobody lights a lamp and then immediately covers it up.

That's pointless. It should be the same with the church. Of course, it can feel safer and simpler to just keep the light to ourselves, can't it?

The world's dark. The world's complicated. It's messy. So we can start to think, let's just remove ourselves from the world and stick to ourselves. But I like what one writer said.

[18:19] He said, putting a lamp under a basket might keep it from getting blown out. But the price for such protection is darkness. The church must radiate beyond its walls.

You're the light of the world. And into the world you must go. Not to look just like the world, not to imitate the world, not to become darkness, but to shine practically the light of what Jesus calls good works.

When the western half of the Roman Empire dissolved and collapsed in the fourth and fifth centuries, what did the church do in response? Interestingly, in this time of what seemed like utter collapse of civilization, the church came forth with some of its most creative power.

in that time when it seemed like everything was crumbling around them and the world as they knew it was being totally thrown apart, it was the church that began to develop schools and hospitals.

They began to create institutions, we might say, that produced lasting good for the lives of those inside and outside the church. could we be living in such a historical moment?

[19:52] Rather than simply denouncing the darkness around us, do we shine light into it? Do we think and act creatively to serve the common good?

Don't get me wrong, evil should be named as evil. If the church has lost its saltiness, what good is it? Have you ever just eaten salt?

It hurts, right? Like, who does that? You know? But after the sting of the salt, there has to be the light of hope, a light that lights a different path, a path of beauty and life.

We can't just rail against the moral evils that we see around us without then repenting that we haven't taken our light into those places, without then going forth to try to think creatively to construct some kind of thing that will create some good there.

So we must let our light shine practically for the good of our neighbors. But lastly, we must let our light shine not just corporately and practically, but doxologically.

[21:06] Now, what do I mean by that? A doxology is sort of a praise, right? I mean, the purpose in letting our light shine isn't so that we are seen as great, but so that God is seen as great.

Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to whom? To your Father who is in heaven. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter what people think of us.

At the end of the day, most people aren't thinking about anyone but themselves, right? At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what people think about me or you or Trinity Baptist Church.

It doesn't matter what they think about us, but it does matter what they think about God. Of course, we want to be liked, right? We want people to love the church. But what matters most is what they think about God.

And if our good works can direct people's attention to God and to His beauty and His glory, then it will have been worth it. But you know, this sort of raises an interesting question at this point in the verse.

[22 : 15] How will people know when they see our good works to give glory to our Father in heaven? Will they just sort of naturally connect those dots on their own? Will they see Christians doing good deeds and say, oh wow, glory to God the Father?

I mean, that's not what my neighbors would do, right? They probably won't connect those dots.

The only way they'll know to direct their praise to God is because at some point they've actually heard the where and the why and the how we do these good deeds in the first place.

because we've actually told them something about the gospel. We've actually shined, we've actually shown, what's the right conjugation of that verb?

We've shined. We've shined our light in not just our life but with our words. We love God because He first loved us.

[23 : 17] We give generously because God the Father gave His own Son for us. We forgive because we've been forgiven. We advocate for the helpless and the vulnerable because when we were helpless an advocate stood up for us, Jesus Christ the righteous.

We're children of a heavenly Father who makes us reign to fall on the just and the unjust and so we shine our light into the world not expecting praise or accolades but because we want people to see how good God is and we tell them so.

You know, most of the time, what can we expect when we go forth doing good works? I mean, the end of the Beatitudes sort of says, well, most of the time or some of the time or a lot of the time, you can expect misunderstanding or even ridicule but there will be times Jesus promises when they'll see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven and we shine our light into the world not because we want praise but because we want people to see how wonderful God is.

So, you know, in that sense, in that sense, our goal in letting our light shine is not at the end of the day to change the world per se but to change the worship of the world.

we want the whole world to know how great our Heavenly Father is and how great is His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

[24 : 55] And if going forth doing good deeds can help create conditions where people are loved and protected and safe and there are just things happening, if that can give praise to God the Father, then we'll do it for His sake, for His sake.

And seeing that spread of the worship of God the Father, that's our greatest motivation. That's our greatest motivation for what we might call the mission of the church.

That's what takes us out of the church walls shining our light to the end of the street and to the ends of the earth. The glory of God. God. And you know, make no mistake about it, the scope of our calling as a church is global.

It's worldwide. You're the light of the world, Jesus is. And at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus will commission the church to go to the ends of the earth with the gospel to make disciples and to bring glory to God the Father.

So there's a bit of a call at the end of this passage. What will you do to advance this light-bearing mission? All of us should begin where we are.

[26 : 18] But all of us should pray if God wants to keep us where we are. Pray if there's a place where God's light needs to shine to which He's calling you.

to be a place to be a place to be a place in the future. Perhaps it's a professional field in desperate need of light. Many of you are here in New Haven to study, to prepare for your vocational life, whatever that might be.

Are you praying for God to give you a vision and wisdom for how you might be used to bring glory to God in your field among the people that make up your field, among the institutions that make up your field?

Perhaps God's calling you to a neighborhood in our city where light needs to shine. How will you go and let your light shine so that people will see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven?

Perhaps it's not just a profession or a neighborhood here in New Haven, but perhaps it's a people group in the world that's not even yet heard the gospel. Maybe God's calling you into that great work of global gospel mission.

[27 : 22] Or perhaps closer to home, God's calling you to a family down the street that's not yet heard the gospel.

You are the light of the world. Let your light shine. Let the brilliance of Christ in you bring out the beauty of the world God is calling you to.

And may God get all the worship He so rightly deserves. Let's pray together. Father, we pray that you would encourage our hearts.

Lord, often the task feels so daunting before us. We can see how broken and difficult things are around us. And yet thank you for the bracing confidence that we hear in this passage that you've promised us.

That as we let our light shine, others will see our good works and give glory to you, Father in heaven. Help us not to lose confidence in your promise that this is so.

[28 : 42] And would you be directing us how we might use the gifts, the talents, the abilities, the desires that you've given us to see more and more of your light shine. God, the last thing we want to do is take this great light that you've given us, that you've made us into and hide it because we're afraid or because we're distracted.

Lift up our gaze, God, to the beauty, to the adventure that you're calling us to as your church. And would we follow you and let our light shine.

In Jesus' name, amen.