

Matthew
The Light of the World (Part 1)
Matthew 5:14-16
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Well, this morning it is a joy for me to ask you to turn with me again to Matthew, chapter 5. As we prepare for the Lord's Table, I want to come back to "The Sermon on the Mount" as we continue to work our way through Matthew's Gospel. Genesis, chapter 1, tells us that God Himself created light. Genesis 1:3 says, "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." By divine fiat, God simply spoke and light came into existence. As a result, our lives are literally flooded with light; light from the sun, from the moon, from the stars, from fire, and candlelight, and now the principles that flow out in electric lights.

But it's interesting that for something that's so much a part of our lives, it still remains shrouded in so much mystery. What exactly is light? You ever thought about that? What is light? Well, in 1672, Isaac Newton offered the first truly scientific theory, he conjectured that light is composed of particles. Six years after that, Christiaan Huygens posited the wave theory, and in the early 1800s, Thomas Young demonstrated that light is, in fact, composed of waves. But the journey continues because since the birth of quantum mechanics, the scientific consensus is that actually both are true. Light is a quantum electromagnetic entity that combines both waves and particles. But the truth is the issue is still far from resolved, and there's still a lot of mystery surrounding the nature of light. In fact, it remains almost as much a mystery today as it was the day God said to Job, during the period of the patriarchs, in Job 38:19-20, "Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where is its place, that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home?"

Scripture actually associates light often with the person of God. Psalm 104:2, “Covering Yourself with light as with a cloak.” 1 Timothy 6:16, “who (God) alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light.” 1 John 1:5, “God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.” When you think about those passages, it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus, God's eternal Son made flesh, is also often associated with light. John 1:9, “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.” And Jesus Himself said in John 8:12, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.”

Now, considering those statements about God and about Jesus our Lord, it's remarkable that in the passage we come to this morning, Jesus says that we, who are His genuine followers, we “are the light of the world.” Let's read it together, Matthew 5, and I'll begin reading in verse 13. This is the word of our Lord to us.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty *again*? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus here teaches us that if you belong to His spiritual kingdom, if you've truly been regenerated, you've experienced the new birth, then He has given to you a powerful influence on the world around you. In our text, He uses two images, salt and light, to describe the power of that influence. The last time we studied Matthew's gospel together, we looked at verse 13, and there we learned that we “are the salt of the earth.” As I pointed out, the major use of salt in the

ancient world was as a preservative, and so Jesus calls us salt in order to show the power of our preserving, purifying influence. We combat, by our presence and our words, the moral and spiritual decay around us. But today, in verses 14 to 16, we learn that we “are the light of the world.” Now, don't misunderstand, Jesus is still talking about the power of Christian influence. This second illustration is essentially making the same basic point as that of salt.

But let me show you the similarities between these two metaphors, salt and light. What are “The Similarities between Salt and Light?” Well, first of all, and this is obvious, but “Both of them were made by God.” Secondly, “Both were and are common in every home.” Jesus uses pictures from everyday life. Thirdly, “Both of these must be intentionally put in place in order to fulfill their function.” Someone has to salt the meat, and someone has to light the lamp. We'll come back to the significance of that in a little bit. Number four, “Both salt and light have limited impact alone.” A grain of salt only has impact when it's joined with others. This morning, when I had my breakfast of eggs, I didn't put a single grain of salt on those eggs—it needed more than that for it to have that influencing power, they needed to be combined together. Same thing is true with our influence. A small lamp only illumines a city on a hill when it is joined with many others. Number five, “Both, salt and light, are distinct in their very nature from what they influence.” We are different than the people around us by God's doing. And number six, “Both describe our world in horrific terms—as rotten and dark.” Salt describes the world as rotten and decaying. Light describes the world we live in as dark. I could add a seventh that's not on the slide, and that is, “Both salt and light have both negative and positive functions.” We'll talk about that more in just a moment as well. There are differences, however, between salt and light. “Salt is primarily negative; and light is primarily positive.” “Salt retards decay and rottenness; light dispels darkness.”

Now, as we prepare for communion this morning, I want us just to begin to consider this second picture of our influence as light. Lord willing, we'll finish it next Lord's Day. But let's look at this metaphor of light. Like we saw with salt, Jesus' statement comparing our influence as believers on the unbelievers around us, comparing it here to light, also has two distinct parts. So let's look at those two parts together. First of all, the first part we need to think about is "The Picture That Jesus Uses," the picture Jesus uses. Look at verse 14. "You are the light of the world."

Now, let me point out, first of all, the pronoun 'you' in the Greek text is emphatic. In an inflected language, you can include the pronoun as part of the verb. Some of you speak languages where the pronoun is included as an ending on the verb; that's true in Greek. And if you intentionally add a pronoun, you actually put it in the text, then you're making something an emphasis. So Jesus essentially says here, "You who are truly My followers and only you provide light for the entire world." The sphere of our collective influence is the world. He means by the world here, not like the created world, trees and mountains and hills and valleys, instead, He means the people in the world. He's talking about unbelievers. That's the sphere of our collective influence. It's the lost world of unbelievers; we are light to the world of unbelievers.

But what kind of light does He mean? Well, Jesus mentions here "Two Kinds of Light." First of all, the end of verse 14, He mentions "The collective light of the lamps of an entire city." That's the picture at the end of verse 14. The second kind of light He mentions, in verse 15, is "The individual light of a lamp in a typical one-room home" in the first century. Now, in both cases, obviously, the source of light is the same—it's a lamp. The Greek word for 'lamp' refers to a small terracotta bowl that was filled with olive oil, and a wick was stuck into that olive oil. It

was often enclosed, but obviously it had a hole in the top to pour in the oil and then it always had a wick. Sometimes they would have handles. The ones you see from the first century there did not have handles, but sometimes they had a handle to carry them, but often they were like the ones you see on the slide behind me. These are historic examples.

Now, like the first metaphor, there is a connection. This is a metaphor as well, and as we saw with salt, when you have a metaphor, you have a topic, an image, and a point of similarity. The topic here is all believers, that's what He's talking about, all believers. The image He uses to describe all believers is light. So the question then is, "What is the point of similarity or what are the points of similarity between all believers and light?"

Well, we find this when we think about the functions of light; there are "Two Basic Functions of Light." First of all, a lamp's light "Exposes the filth hidden in the darkness." That's what light does. If you want to clean a room and it's entirely dark or really dim, what do you do? You turn on the light so you can see the dirt that needs to be addressed, the dirt that needs to be cleaned up. The same thing is true in your life. A room that seems clean in the dark, you turn on the light and what happens? The dirt becomes readily apparent. In fact, if you really want to be grossed out, turn on a black light in your clean bathroom and you'll see all of the bodily fluids that you missed. Now, I just wrecked some of your lives; you will never get over that illustration.

There's a second function of light, however, and that is that light "Reveals the beauty that's hidden in the darkness." You see, if you turn on the light, and if there's something there in that room that's beautiful, the light allows you to see it. Now, those are really just two aspects of the same basic purpose. One of them is negative; light exposes what is dirty and filthy. The other is positive; it allows you to see what's beautiful and attractive because, in the end, light simply

allows us to see reality; light lets us see things as they really are. That's the picture that Jesus uses.

Now, that brings us to the second part of this statement and the bulk of this paragraph, and that is “The Point That Jesus Makes.” Understanding the sort of metaphor, the image, let's look at the point. In the rest of this paragraph, using the metaphor of light, Jesus makes two spiritual assertions about His followers. Number one, assertion number one, “Our Influence Is Inevitable,” it's inevitable. Look again at verse 14, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Now, again, don't misunderstand. Jesus isn't mixing metaphors. He's not changing metaphors; He's still comparing us to light in the second half of verse 14, but He's doing so in the sense of the collective light of the lamps of an entire city at night. See, before there were airplanes, a hill was the safest place you could build a city. Also, before air conditioners, building on a hill meant that you could enjoy the cool afternoon and evening breezes, so that's where most ancient cities were built, up on the hill, even through medieval times, right? I mean, if you go to Tuscany, for example, in Italy, you'll find that all of the hills are dotted with these ancient medieval cities. Same thing was true in Israel; that's how they built. And even today, frankly, hilltops are still often crowned with cities.

Now, at night, in Israel in the first century, when all of the lamps and torches of a city were ablaze, you could actually navigate the countryside by following the light from those hilltop cities. Many of the cities in ancient Israel were built with native limestone that reflected the light brilliantly. In fact, many of you have had the opportunity, even with our church, others of you on other occasions, to go to Israel, and if you've been around the city of Jerusalem at night with the light reflecting off of that limestone, it's a beautiful golden glow, a golden city. That's how it was in the ancient world. Jesus said that such a city and its light—notice what He says in verse

14—cannot be hidden. You simply can't hide the light from a hilltop city. Still, one of the greatest difficulties in wartime is hiding the lights of cities. We've all read or heard about all of the blackout procedures that were necessary in Great Britain during World War II to protect the cities against airplanes because of the lights. So Christ is saying here that, if you're His true follower, it's as difficult to hide your light as it is to hide the light from a city built on a hill. It's virtually impossible! And just as you can't hide the lights of a city on a mountain at night, we can't hide our influence as Christians. It's inevitable, that if we're truly redeemed, if we've truly been changed, if we're new creatures in Jesus Christ, then our light will be seen.

Do you understand, Christian, the power of your influence? Do you understand this great reality? It's not a question of whether you will influence others, it's a question of how you will influence others. God has made you light in Jesus Christ. So the question is, does your influence point people around you to Christ, to His Gospel, to your Father, or does your influence point somewhere else?

Now, we can't be sure in verse 14, but it's possible that by using this image of the combined lights of a hilltop city, Jesus intends to refer to the light that we project collectively as the people of God. As we combine our lights together, as it were, as each of us as a lamp is combined, I think it's very possible that Jesus is saying that this church and other biblical churches are like shining cities set on a hill, communities of light spread across a darkened world. I think the best illustration you and I can have, if you've been in an airplane at night, you fly across the United States, and you see all of the dark, and then you see these communities of lights. I think Christ very well may be saying the church is like that. As you fly across a darkened world, you see these communities, these pockets of lights. Jesus says, "Our Influence Is Inevitable." "A city set on a hill (simply) cannot be hidden."

But secondly, Jesus also says that “Our Influence Is Intentional,” it's intentional. In verses 15 and 16, Jesus explains that God intended that our light as believers serves two distinct purposes. We're going to look at one of those purposes today, and we'll look at the other, Lord willing, next Sunday. It's intentional. God intended our influence, first of all, to serve this distinct purpose, “To Give Light to the World.” Notice verse 15, “Nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.” God made us light. Do you understand that? You were dark, and God breathed into your life with the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit, and He made you light, He made you light, and then He placed you in the place where He wanted you, in the darkness, so that your light would be seen. That's the picture in this metaphor, so that collectively we would be light throughout the world. He says it negatively. He says, verse 15, “nor does *anyone* light a lamp (Who lit the lamp? God did, but you don't light a lamp.) and put it under a basket.”

Now, the Greek word for ‘basket’ comes from a Latin word that refers to ‘a dry measurement of grain,’ but eventually the word came to mean not only the measurement, but ‘the container in which the measurement was made.’ It could refer, as it does here, to a tightly woven basket, or sometimes to a clay pot, but whether it was a basket or whether it was a pot used to measure grain, it held about two gallons of grain. Jesus' point is you don't light a lamp and then cover it with a basket or a clay pot. No! No one lights a lamp to hide it, verse 15 again, “nor does *anyone* light a lamp and put it under a basket.” On the other hand, they put it “on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.” You understand this, I mean, in your home, you want the source of light to be elevated so that it spreads the greatest amount of light. That's why we put lamps on our tables. That's why you have floor lamps that extend the light even higher,

and we even put light on our ceilings so that the light is spread the greatest degree across the room.

In first century homes, if you lit an oil lamp at night, and you would have, you wanted its light to reach as far as possible, and so you did one of two things. Either you built a stand, like a little half-moon shelf, into a pillar in the room or into the wall of the room, and maybe halfway or more up the wall or up the pillar, and that's where you set the lamp. Or sometimes, as Jesus refers to here, you actually had a piece of furniture, a lampstand, that was intended as the place you placed that lamp, in the middle of the room, so that it spread the light throughout that room. That's the picture here. And we do the same thing. I mean, think about it. When your power goes out here in North Texas, a thunderstorm rolls through and the power goes out, what do you do? Well, first of all, you find your way to either your phone or your flashlight, so you can then hopefully go find a lantern that you've purchased, and then if you have a lantern, what do you do? You light it, and you put it in a strategic place so that it gives light to the entire room. Why? Because we want its light to be seen as far as possible. The *raison d'etre* for a lamp is to be visible and to give light. It's ridiculous to hide it or obscure it in any way. What would your family members think of you if you lit that lantern in the power outage, and you hid it behind the sofa? "What's wrong with you, Dad." It makes no sense.

Now, come back to verse 15 in Jesus' metaphor here. The question is this, "Who lit the lamp?" Somebody has to light it. And "Who put it on the lampstand?" Well, in this metaphor, it's God. Ephesians 5:8, "You were formerly darkness," that's you, that's me. "You were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord." God found you dark and He made you light. That's the reality. Christian, God made you a lamp. He made you light when you were once darkness, and He did so for a purpose. And let me take it a step further, back to Jesus' metaphor,

not only did He make you light, but He set you on the lampstand that He intended to put you on, to place you on. You are there in your home, in your family, in your community, in your school, in your workplace; if you're a Christian, He made you light, and He set you on the lampstand you're on so that you would shed light where you are. This was the divine plan.

So, don't try to hide your light; don't try to pretend you're not a Christian; don't be ashamed of your faith in Jesus Christ. Be light! We're going to talk about what that means more next week, but what it means is “Be who you are in Jesus Christ; be the Beatitudes, be that kind of person, show the fruit of the Spirit and open your mouth when it's appropriate and speak the truth. Be light—you're on earth for this purpose. God made you light. He put you on the lampstand where you are, and He intends for you to shed light to those around you. Everything else, as you've heard me say before, everything else we do as Christians, we'll do better in heaven. Our worship will be better in heaven, on and on it goes. It'll all be better in heaven except one thing. There's one thing you do here you can't do in heaven, and that is be a light to the unbelievers around you! We're not here for ourselves. You're not here for your career. You're not here for your own life. Oh, those are good gifts, enjoy them; they're God's good gifts to you, but that's not why you're here. You're here to be light. As Christians, we serve both the functions of light we talked about a moment ago; we serve both of those functions in a dark world. Like Jesus our Lord, first of all, by our presence and our words, “We expose what is false and sinful,” by our presence and our words, we expose what is false and sinful. Secondly, by our presence and our words, “We illuminate what is true and beautiful.”

Now, our Lord mentions both of these purposes of light about Himself in John 3. Turn there with me. John, chapter 3, and look at verse 19, again, Jesus is talking about Himself. When we think about Jesus being the Light and our being the light, Jesus is the sun, S-U-N, and we are

merely the moon; we're reflected light. We're reflecting His light—we don't have any light in and of ourselves, but we serve the same purpose as lights, as Jesus, and look at what Jesus says about Himself, verse 19:

This is the judgment (John 3:19. He's talking about Himself here.) that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds (what?) will be exposed.”

You see, Jesus being the Light and coming into the world, guess what He did? He served one of the functions of light—by His life, by His righteousness, by His words, He exposed evil, and so do we.

Notice the second purpose of light, verse 21. Again, Jesus talking about Himself, “But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” Jesus says, “Listen, when you've been changed, when you've experienced the new birth, when God has changed you and now your deeds match a redeemed heart, it's beautiful, and the light exposes that beauty.” And the same thing is true for us.

Now, by using this image of us as light, Jesus again paints an unflattering picture of the world. With salt, he pictures the world as rotten and decaying, but with light, he pictures the world, that is the world of unbelievers, all the unbelievers around you, they are marked by total and complete darkness. It's ironic, isn't it? Because our world is constantly and loudly championing (What?) its enlightenment. Jesus says, “No, not true!” He says the people in our world live in darkness, and even worse, the darkness lives in them. They live in the darkness of spiritual error, of spiritual ignorance, of spiritual blindness. They live in the darkness of slavery to sin and Satan, and it's in that darkness, brothers and sisters, that you and I are called to be light, to

bring the Light of the truth and the Light of moral purity by being who we are in Jesus Christ. And it exposes the sin, and it shines the Light on God and His beauty. You see, when we are the kind of light we ought to be, that's fulfilling our mission. Here's what France writes, "The job description of a disciple is not fulfilled by private personal holiness, but the witness of public exposure." You see, when we're light in that way, we expose what's hidden in the darkness, and we turn on the Light that shows the beauty of our God and the beauty of our Lord and the beauty of His Gospel. And here's the remarkable truth, only Christians are light! You understand that? There is no light outside of us in the world. Lloyd-Jones writes, "There is no light at all in this world apart from the light provided by Christian people and the Christian faith." "You are the light of the world," Jesus said. Is that how you see your life? Is that the lens through which you look at your existence? God made you light, and then God placed you on the lampstand where He wanted you, so that in your sphere of influence, you, by your presence, by your character, by your good works, by your words, would shine the light to all those around you.

But how did that happen? How did you and I, who once were darkness, become light? One last text I want you to look at, turn to 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, I love this text; Paul explains here, 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, and verse 3, he says:

If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the God of this world (Satan) has blinded the minds of the unbelieving (Here's the darkness, they've been blinded by Satan.) so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For (Paul says that's why.) we do not preach ourselves but Christ (Messiah) Jesus." (He's the Light. But how did you and I become light? Verse 6.) For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness (He's talking about the

creation, the God who said, “Let there be light.”) (He) is the One who has shown in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

You see, what happened is you were living in darkness, and the darkness lived in you, but one day, God brought the Gospel to bear into your life, and the God who in the beginning said, “Let there be light,” spoke that day and said, “Let there be Light in that person's soul, and you became Light.” That's why we're Light, and that's what we celebrate in the Lord's Table. Take a moment and prepare your heart as the men come to service.

Our Father, we are truly amazed at your grace to us in Jesus Christ, that we who were darkness have become light in the Lord, that You who spoke the light of this created order into being spoke through the Gospel light into our souls, and we are light, Help us now to live as children of the light. Lord, help us to be light to those around us. Help us to walk in the light as opposed to walking in the darkness. Lord, remind us that You have made us light, and You have placed us on the lampstand that is our lives so that light would radiate out from us to those around us. Help us to be like that. And Father, I pray for those here this morning who are still in darkness, whose souls are still dark, Father, I pray that You would do what only You can do this morning, that You would say, “Let there be Light, and there would be Light.” That they would see Your glory in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Gospel that He brought, that they would repent of their sins and believe in His life, death, and resurrection as their only hope of being right with You. Father, I pray that today would be that day.

But Lord, for the rest of us, as we prepare to take of the Lord's Table, I pray that You would forgive our sins against You. Lord, you've already bathed our souls, and we are clean, as our Lord said so beautifully, but as we walk through this world, we gather the dust of the world on

our feet. We need our feet to be clean. Lord, we come to You not seeking the forgiveness of a Judge, You've already declared us righteous in Jesus Christ, but we come seeking the forgiveness of a Father, One we've offended, sinned against. Lord, bring to each of our hearts specific sins to mind, and give us the courage and the honesty to confess them to You, and give us the resolve to turn from those sins and to walk in righteousness. Father, as we cry out, forgive our sins for Jesus' sake, so that as we worship Him through this ordinance, we could do so with clean hands and pure hearts. We pray for His namesake and for His glory. Amen.