

Being Lights

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Last week in the adult Bible class, we spent quite a bit of time discussing Matthew 5:14-16. This is one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. I remember a kid in high school who had a T-shirt that referred to the passage. Most of us don't recall the first time we encountered it. Despite its familiarity, though, it is one of the most difficult texts in the Bible to put into practice, and for many of us, the primary reaction it produces within us is guilt.

Even though it's unpleasant, guilt isn't necessarily bad, but when that feeling of inadequacy and failure doesn't lead us to positive change, guilt is nothing more than wasted suffering. Worse yet, it may even lead us to become defensive and harden our hearts against the call of Scripture. This morning, then, let's consider what we can concretely do to fulfill the wishes that Jesus expresses in this text. Let's ask how we can become lights.

What Does It Mean?

Before we pull the trigger on that, though, we have to figure out where to aim the gun. Before we start talking about how to be a light, we have to determine what being a light means. Scripturally speaking, a light has several distinct attributes. First of all, being a light means **BEING DIFFERENT**. Paul explains the reason for this difference in Colossians 3:1-3. If we want our lives to shine with the light of Christ, our minds must be set on the things of heaven, not the things of earth. There are some earthly priorities that are obviously wrong. We know better than to share the mindset of the alcoholic or the adulterer. However, what about the mindset of our next-door neighbors, people who are decent and respectable but aren't Christians? I'll tell you what they want. They want good steady jobs that will enable them to sustain themselves and buy a few treats now and then. They want to live in a good school district that will equip their children to do well in life. They want good relationships with their families and friends.

Don't get me wrong, friends. There's nothing inherently sinful about any of those things. However, if those things are the focus of our lives, our minds are just as set on the things below as the mind of the drunk or the philanderer. If we put those things before God, we will not shine as lights, and we will not go to heaven. Being different means that we must adopt a mindset that is radically different not only from the obviously wicked, but from the respectable and the ordinary too. Jesus doesn't want us to be respectable and ordinary. He wants us to be disciples.

Second, being a light means **BEING LOVING**. Jesus defines what this means in Matthew 5:43-44. I'm afraid that sometimes, we limit the scope of this verse much more than we should. We get too caught up in the provocative commandment to love our enemies that we focus **ONLY** on loving our enemies. I don't know about the rest of y'all, but I can't think of anybody in my life right now whom I would describe as an enemy, and that makes this verse really abstract and hypothetical. In a lot of ways, it helps us to understand our Lord's intent when we insert the word "even" into this text. Jesus wants us to love everyone, even our enemies. Jesus wants us to pray for everyone, even our persecutors.

We need to understand, friends, that indifference is just as much the enemy of love as hatred is, and this is where our unique character as disciples of Jesus ought to shine. Most people in the world aren't hateful people, but they are indifferent people. They regard the problems that other people have as other people's problems.

Jesus didn't do that. Instead, He took the problems of others and made them His own. He carried our sorrows, He bore our griefs, and He did it because He loved us. He is our example. If we are truly His disciples, that means that we don't get to detach ourselves from the sorrows and griefs of others either. We don't have the luxury of remaining uninvolved. We need to love everyone, friend, enemy, and in-between, so much that their problems become ours.

Third, being a light means **BEING ACTIVE**. Consider James' sarcastic question in James 2:15-17. When I was growing up, I often heard this passage quoted to justify the claim that baptism is necessary for forgiveness of sins. Since then, I've often wondered why preachers liked to bypass the dozen or more passages that explicitly discuss baptism for the forgiveness of sins in favor of one that doesn't even mention baptism.

However, even if baptism isn't under discussion in James 2, plenty of other important things are. James' point here isn't that faith and works are two irreconcilable opposites. Instead, he wants us to understand that where faith is, there works will be also. We can't simply have different thoughts and different goals than the world and expect to be lights. We can't simply have more loving and compassionate feelings than the world and expect to be lights. Instead, those vast differences in mindset need to lead to equally vast differences in action. To rephrase James' question, what good is it if we sit around in Bible class and solemnly agree that yeah, we need to set our minds on things above, but the rest of the week, we live lives that nobody could tell apart from our neighbors? What good is it if we acknowledge that yeah, we're supposed to have *agape* for everybody, even our enemies, but all week long, we show a whole lot more devotion to our favorite shows on Netflix than we do to people who need help? What good is it if we invest more mental effort in excusing our failure to be lights than we do in figuring out how to succeed? The mere fact that we appear in this church building every Sunday proves nothing about our discipleship. Only a life lived like Jesus' life can prove that.

Finally, being a light means **BRINGING GOD GLORY**. Paul describes an example of this from his life in Galatians 1:22-24. What's tricky about this is that back in Matthew 5, Jesus isn't talking about us glorifying God ourselves. He's talking about us living in such a way that it leads others to glorify Him. It's not enough for me to go around serving and worshiping God all day long myself. Instead, I must have a significant spiritual impact on the lives of others. This starts with our families. Do we live with our spouses in such a way that from time to time, they are compelled to stop and praise God because they see Jesus so clearly in us? Does our teaching and example have such an effect on our children that they stop and thank God for our role in their lives? Are people at church drawn nearer to the Lord simply by being around us? What about the non-Christians we encounter? Do we live with such purpose that we make them question their assumptions about what matters in life? Better still, do any of those non-Christians come to Christ because of the light we shed? Or, instead, does the light of Christ in us gleam so dimly that the people in our lives can easily ignore it?

The Good Samaritan

During the second part of our study together, we're going to consider the parable of the good Samaritan. If the let-your-light-shine text is familiar, this one is even more so. They name hospitals after the good Samaritan. Because it's so familiar, though, we are often inclined to overlook it. We're so used to it that we don't pay attention to what it's saying. It's like if we had the Mona Lisa hanging in our living rooms. For a week or two, we'd be really excited about it, but then, after that, it would become just another decoration, and we wouldn't pay it any attention. In truth, the parable of the good Samaritan is a Mona Lisa of moral reasoning. Let's attend to it now before we partake of the Lord's Supper.

The parable itself is prompted by **AN EXCHANGE**. This dialogue is recorded in Luke 10:25-29. Honestly, friends, I can't help but chuckle every time I read this. Here, we see a lawyer who decides that he's going to put Jesus to the test. Lots of religious leaders in the gospels do the same thing. They spring a pop quiz on Jesus to see whether He's qualified to teach the people. Usually, those pop quizzes don't go the way the quizzier planned, and so it is here. The lawyer asks Jesus a question typical of these examinations. He wants to know how to inherit eternal life. Jesus deftly turns the question around on the lawyer, who provides the correct love-the-Lord, love-your-neighbor answer, and Jesus gives him a verbal thumbs-up. The would-be professor has now been schooled by the student.

The lawyer does not like this, not one little bit. We can easily imagine the flush on his face as the crowd laughs at him, and so he responds with a question not on the exam study sheet. He asks who his neighbor is. Really, though, the form of the question veils the lawyer's intent. He doesn't want to know who his neighbor is so that he can help him. He wants to know who his neighbor isn't, so that he has an excuse NOT to help. What's more, there is no book-chapter-and-verse answer in the Law of Moses to the question, so the lawyer figures he has a built-in opportunity to attack Jesus no matter what the Lord's answer turns out to be. He figures he's going to get some of his pride back.

Whenever I see one of Jesus' opponents hit Him with one of these killer questions, it always reminds me of one of those Looney Tunes cartoons where Wil E. Coyote is devising yet another elaborate scheme to catch the Roadrunner. You don't know how it's going to fail, but you're sure that it will. In reply, Jesus relates a story beginning with **A MAN IN NEED**. Read with me from Luke 10:30-32. A man traveling the Jericho road, which all of Jesus' listeners would have known was extremely dangerous, is set upon by robbers, beaten, and left for dead. A priest and a Levite, pillars of the Jewish religious establishment, men renowned for their faithfulness to the Law, happen by the location of the ambush, but they pass by on the other side. Earlier in the lesson, we explored the idea that the opposite of love can be indifference as well as hate, and here we see indifference on full display. When we describe the priest and the Levite as indifferent, that doesn't require that we attribute hearts of stone to them. It could be that they saw the man bleeding and suffering by the side of the road and felt sorry for him. The problem was that they didn't feel sorry enough to do anything about it, and that's indifference too. Regardless of what they felt, what they did was get as far away from being involved as they could. Even today, good intentions don't make us pleasing to God. Only action does.

This is where Jesus presents us with the character of **THE SAMARITAN** himself. Look at Luke 10:33-35. To the ears of Jesus' audience, this character would have sounded like a combination of opposites. On the one hand, he was a Samaritan, and to a crowd of Jews, that would have been strikes one, two, and three against him. As John notes in the early part of John 4, Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Certainly, the modern-day U.S. is not a wonderland of racial harmony, but just imagine how bad things would be if somebody of one race wouldn't even TALK to someone of another race. That's where the Jews and the Samaritans were 2000 years ago, so this Samaritan character is a lightning rod for bigotry, race hatred, and prejudice. Most Jews would probably have expected him to start rifling the body.

However, the Samaritan who the racial script says is supposed to be evil is actually a good Samaritan. He can probably tell that the wounded man is a Jew, but he doesn't care. He puts his life at risk by lingering in this robber-infested area, he spends time by binding the man's wounds and taking him to an inn, and he spends money by paying for his care. In every respect, he is everything that Jesus implies the priest and the Levite should have been.

This takes us, then, to **THE PUNCH LINE**. It appears in Luke 10:36-37. Jesus begins by subtly rephrasing the lawyer's question. The lawyer wanted to know who his neighbor was, whom he had to help. Jesus asked who the

wounded man's neighbor was—who actually helped him. The lawyer misses the significance of this subtle shift, which means that his head is about to join the other hunting trophies over Jesus' fireplace. He gives the obvious answer. The Samaritan, despite the racial differences between him and the victim, was the one proved to be the neighbor. However, the lawyer can't bring himself to praise even a hypothetical Samaritan, so he calls him, "the one who showed mercy".

However, even that lame answer is enough. Jesus tells the lawyer to do the same. In other words, if we want to know who our neighbor is, all we have to do is look for people who need help. We prove that we are their neighbors when we show them mercy, whether that be by helping them unload a washing machine or by teaching them the gospel. Each one of us carries the answer to the question in our own hearts, by how widely we are willing to love. Our willingness to love and our willingness to be a light are almost exactly the same thing.

Before the Lord's Supper, then, let's reflect first on Jesus Himself, who proved to be our neighbor by showing mercy to all of us, even at the cost of His own life. Then, let's consider Jesus not merely as our Savior, but as our example. If that's how brightly the Master shone, then how brightly should His disciples shine?

A Light in Practice

Finally, we come to the long-awaited application section of our lesson. Let's look at what it means to be a light in practice. This begins when we determine to **BE READY TO HELP**. Paul endorses this kind of readiness in Titus 3:11. It's not enough for us to do good when the opportunity is thrust on us. We must be alert for opportunities and take advantage of them when they appear. Otherwise, we fall into what I think of as the broken-down-car trap. I think we all know how this goes. We're driving down the interstate, and we see a car on the shoulder with the hood up and someone peering inside, looking distressed. Usually, this touches off a huge internal debate in me. On the one hand, I know I should help. On the other hand, I know I don't know anything about cars. On the third hand, it was a man, and he looked like he'd be OK, and so on. By the time I finish my debate, the broken-down car is 20 miles behind me, and I have every excuse in the world to keep driving. I'm not proud of that, but it's pretty much what I do.

I don't think this is just a problem on the highway, though. I think this is a problem that we have with mercy generally. We haven't already resolved to be merciful people, so when opportunities to show mercy appear, we aren't ready for them. What should be a non-decision for disciples of Jesus is a decision for us, and we're paralyzed by the debate between "should" and "don't wanna" until the opportunity vanishes, and we're left standing there feeling guilty. Now, obviously we need to be prudent in the way we help. I would discourage my sisters in Christ from stopping to help broken-down motorists or from opening the front door to strange men. Other than that, though, if we can help, and if we aren't going to endanger ourselves by helping, we need to determine that we will help before the situation arises.

Second, we must **BE READY TO SPEAK**. Consider the way Peter puts it in 1 Peter 3:15. If we have Interstate Syndrome when we see people we could help, we *really* have it when an opportunity arises to talk about the gospel. Even though we presumably care more about Jesus than anything or anyone else, we aren't ready to proclaim Him as our Lord. When an opening does appear, we allow the devil to suck us into that internal dialogue until the moment passes and the opportunity is lost. A lot of the time, we're afraid to speak up because we don't want to appear pushy.

In that light, here's something for us to think about. We all know that the Bible teaches that lying is a sin. As far as I can tell, the reason WHY lying is a sin is because we're taking somebody's freedom of choice away from them. We think they'll act in a way we don't like if we tell them the truth; we think they'll act in a way we do like if we lie to them, so we lie to make the choice for them. Isn't that too often what's going on in our heads when it comes to evangelism? We think that if we start talking about the Bible, they will react negatively toward us; we think that if we remain silent, they'll stay happy with us, so we don't say anything. We make the choice for them.

Brethren, that's simply not a loving and godly perspective to have. God has given free will to every human being under heaven. Everybody has the right to make the choice to serve Him or not. When we conceal the truth, we are withholding the information that they need to make the right choice, all because we're worried about the fallout if they make the wrong one. At the end of the day, though, that is their choice, and we don't have the right to make it for them.

When we speak, though, we must take care to **SPEAK TRUTH IN LOVE**. Look at Ephesians 4:15. Notice that this verse doesn't say, "Speak the truth in self-righteousness," nor does it say, "Remain silent out of love." Instead, it prescribes both the right action and the right motivation. We can't simply assert to somebody else that we love them. Instead, we have to have proven it to them by repeatedly blessing them and doing good for them. Once someone knows that we are speaking to them in love, though, they will often be willing to hear a whole lot of truth.

The other day in class, we were talking about whether it was ever appropriate to tell someone they were going to hell. As I was reflecting on that conversation, I remembered that I literally have told someone he was going to hell. It was our departed brother O.J. For those of you who never got the chance to know O.J., he was a big man in every respect: big body, big personality, and big heart. He was very intelligent, very argumentative, and very stubborn, not unlike the guy up in the pulpit right now, which might be why we got on so well. Because he was such a strong-willed man, sometimes, if you wanted to get his attention, you had to hit him about as hard as you could.

One day, then, O.J. had gotten into it with his wife, and when I arrived for our study, he was grumbling and fussing about how when she got home from work, she was going find all of her stuff out on the curb. Here's what I said to him: I said, "Brother O.J.! You hear me! Those are ungodly words, they come from an ungodly attitude, and if you do not repent of those words and that attitude, you will lose your soul and go straight to the devil's hell!" And at that, he grumbled and fussed a little bit more, but then he subsided. Now, I don't believe that there's a person in this room to whom I would say that, but it was what O.J. needed to hear. I could get away with saying it because he knew I loved him.

Finally, we must be willing to **ENDURE INCONVENIENCE**. For our text, let's look at 2 Timothy 2:3-4. It's fair to say that in this passage, Paul is encouraging Timothy to be a light. However, his specific instruction is that Timothy must learn to endure hardship, to shine even though persecution would be the likely result.

I don't think any of us have ever been deterred from doing good or from proclaiming Christ by the threat of suffering. Regardless of whether a new wave of persecutors may arise in decades to come, they certainly aren't here now. Instead, we are much more likely to be deterred by inconvenience. Yeah, there's a new family moving in down the street, and they look like they could use a hand, but it's Saturday afternoon, and I've got a whole bunch of yard work to do and a baseball game to watch later. Yeah, there's a couple that's been visiting services a lot recently, and I see them across the auditorium after services are over, but I'd have to push through people to get over there to talk to them, so I'm going to stay right here and talk to the friends I've had for 20 years instead.

Before we allow ourselves to be lulled to sleep by the song of convenience, though, let's ask ourselves whether convenience was a guiding principle in the life of Christ. Did He take the path of least resistance, or did He take the path that led toward heaven? I know that "Embrace inconvenience" doesn't have the same ring to it as "Give me liberty or give me death", but it is often true that our unwillingness to go out of our way is our biggest challenge.