

PUBLIC LIGHTS  
MATTHEW 5:14-16

Many of you spend the better part of the week in a setting where you are surrounded by people that do not know Jesus Christ and are strangers to His grace. It may be in your home. It may be in your neighborhood. It may be at work, or in a classroom, or on a ball team or a club. If your situation is typical, then it's likely that you, as a follower of Jesus, are the minority in that setting. It's possible you may be the *only* Christ follower.

I'd like to make a statement that may seem arrogant, especially if an unbeliever were to hear me make it, but I'd like you to hear me out and see whether Scripture supports it. If you are a believer surrounded by unbelievers at work or school or some other setting then your function and role in that setting is more important and more consequential than anyone else's. It doesn't matter if you are the low man on the totem pole, or the "gofer," or the "newbie." It doesn't matter if you have the least amount of responsibility, or if you are the least intelligent, or the least skilled, or the least experienced.

You have *the* most important and *the* most consequential function and role in that setting by virtue of who you are in Christ. I'm serious. I am not speaking in hyperbole; I am not trying to be dramatic. I am stating a fact, based on a couple of assertions that Jesus made in His Sermon on the Mount.

According to Jesus, His followers are instrumental in weaving the moral fabric of the community in which they live. They have the capacity to set the behavioral trends and standards of a neighborhood or a classroom or an office or a construction site. They have the ability to bring about spiritual transformation in whatever setting they find themselves. Even more compelling, they are capable of influencing the eternal destiny of the people with whom they have contact.

That is what Jesus meant when He said in **Matthew 5:13-16**, <sup>13</sup> *"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."* <sup>14</sup> *You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.* <sup>15</sup> *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.* <sup>16</sup> *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"* (ESV).

Last week we looked at verse 13 and the meaning of the metaphor, salt. I made a case that the kind of salts to which Jesus was referring were phosphate salts used for fertilizer in agriculture. Jesus calls His followers salt in verse 13 because He is asserting that they will have a profound influence on whatever or whoever they contact wherever they are. They will have an intrinsic quality that enables them to stimulate life, growth, health, and productivity in people, families, neighborhoods, communities, and even nations. So, in principle, when they move into a neighborhood, when they are employed at a company, when they join an organization, when they are assigned to a particular class at school, when they are a member of a team, they are going to have a profound influence on that team, class, company, organization, or neighborhood simply by virtue of who they are.

They are salt! That means they turn what are otherwise spiritually barren settings into ones that are spiritually fertile. They infuse those settings with spiritual nutrients that provide spiritual nourishment. Their presence in those settings activates spiritual life. They are catalysts for spiritual transformation. And the implication is that without their influence these settings would remain spiritually barren.

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In verses 14-16 Jesus uses another metaphor—*light*. He says, “*You are the light of the world.*” Once again, this is a declaration, not a command. Jesus is not saying “you ought to be the light of the world,” or “you have the light of the world.” No. “*You are the light of the world.*” There is something in the nature of Christ followers that gives them a light-like quality.

Light, even more than salt, is such a common part of life that we tend to take it for granted, especially those of us who live in an industrialized culture with electricity and streetlights and headlights and switches and automatic timers. For us, light is so prevalent, so accessible, and so instantaneous that likely the only time we think about it or get the least bit excited about it is when we have a power failure.

So it is important, elementary as it may seem, to remind ourselves of the purpose of light. The primary function of light is to *shine* and *illumine* the darkness. Light reveals what is really there. It exposes things that are otherwise hidden and obscured. This is true of every light, no matter how big or small, no matter what degree of brightness. Every light, when it comes into contact with darkness, is conspicuous. It stands out. It is visible. It illumines everything around it and it is evident to everything in its vicinity. That’s the nature of light.

What is more, when light comes into contact with darkness it *always* illumines the darkness. I’ve never known darkness to smother any light. I’ve never known darkness so dark that a light could not shine in it. Darkness cannot prevent a light from shining, it can only prevail when there is *no* light.

Jesus said, “*You are the light of the world.*” Christ-followers, by their very nature, are conspicuous. They stand out. They illumine spiritual darkness, and they shine in such a way that others notice them.

Please understand, this is part of the *nature* of Christ followers. It’s not that they are saying, “Hey everybody, look at me and watch me shine!” No. They don’t *have* to call attention to themselves, because they have an intrinsic quality that makes them shine automatically. And Jesus goes on to say that because they have this light-like quality it stands to reason that they should position themselves in such a way that they are maximally beneficial to those who are around them. Look at the second part of **verse 14**. *A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.*

In Jesus’ day Palestinian cities were built on hills for a number of very practical reasons. In a hot, arid climate the hilltop enabled residents to take advantage of the cool sea breezes. Hilltops were also better defensive positions, since it is far easier to resist an enemy when they are having to go uphill.

But another important reason the cities were built on hills is so they could be visible after dark. If you were out working in the countryside after nightfall or if you were traveling at night, you had to rely on the light from the lamps burning in the homes of the city on the hill. That light was your point of reference. That light is what guided you and directed you to the city from a distance. Cities were built in prominent places so they could be seen.

But there was another simple fact about light in those days. **Verse 15**. *<sup>15</sup> 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.*

Because light is so prevalent and instantaneous in our culture it may be difficult to appreciate this statement. In our living room, for example, we can turn on one switch and a dozen different lamps will go on simultaneously, each of which is connected to a dimmer switch that can vary the degree of brightness in each bulb. A couple of those lamps are for reading, most are for decoration, but some are intentionally hidden in an inconspicuous place

in order to create a warm, welcoming ambiance. We call that indirect lighting.

Indirect lighting was an absurdity in Jesus' day. People lived in one room homes, and they lit those homes with small, clay oil burning lamps that gave off only a modest amount of light. That small lamp was intended to give light to everyone in the house. Thus, no one would think to cover it with a basket, because it would defeat the purpose for which it was lit. Instead, in order to give maximum illumination, it was placed on an elevated lampstand so everyone could benefit.

Jesus is simply saying that light is only beneficial if it is positioned in a prominent place. So when He calls His followers "the light of the world," He is saying that they should be present in places so their shine can benefit many. Since their job is to illumine spiritual darkness, *where they are located is important*. They must be in places of clear visibility—places where they *can* shine.

Jesus never called His followers to be *covert* disciples, or to be in the *secret* service. Clandestine Christians are logical absurdities. We're light! Light stands out! Light is visible! If people don't see our light and benefit from our shine we're not doing our job.

That's why Jesus would say, **verse 16**. ***16 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.***

Jesus begins this statement, "In the same way..." because He wants His followers to know that their location in the world is of utmost importance. "In the same way that you light a lamp and put it on a lampstand instead of under a basket, so also you are to let your light shine so people can see you. You must be visible. You should be present in places so your shine can benefit many."

But that's not all Jesus wants us to know about shining as lights in the world. He also tells us that it is the responsibility of Christ-followers to let their light shine. Verse 16 begins with a command—an imperative. "Let your light shine..." which implies that it is up to us whether or not we shine. Yes we *are* light, by nature—there *is* an intrinsic light-like quality about us. But that does not mean we automatically shine. This imperative suggests that it is possible *not* to shine; it is possible to suppress the light that is in us.

Which raises a question: What *is* the light that is *in* Christ-followers that makes them shine? Is it light that emanates from their winsome personalities? Or their irresistible charm? Their outstanding abilities? Their extraordinary aptitude?

You *know* the answers. There is *nothing* in us or about us in our natural selves that makes us special or would cause us to shine. Jesus chose 12 Galileans to be His disciples, and they were as ordinary as people could be. But after Jesus sent His Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost we are told that the religious leaders in Jerusalem were amazed at them, noting that they *were* unschooled, ordinary men...from Galilee, no less. Which, in our vernacular, would be like saying they were *hillbillies*. It didn't make sense to them. It was as though there was something *in* these disciples that caused them to be extraordinary.

That's exactly right! There *was* something in them! And it is in *every* Christ follower, including you and me. What makes us shine is not our personalities, or charisma, or skill, or intelligence, or any other human quality. It is the Holy Spirit who lives in us. It is God Himself shining through us. Paul said to the Corinthians, ***6 God...made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay*** (2 Cor. 4:6-7). "Jars of clay," is a reference to our human bodies—our frail, finite, flawed bodies. Paul says we are like cracked clay pots filled with God's glory which shines through the cracks, giving light to people in the darkness. And that light is not

something we generate; it is the Holy Spirit living in us that makes us shine.

But it *is our* responsibility to shine. “Let your light shine” is an imperative, which means we make the choice to shine or not. We make the choice whether or not this light in us radiates from us so that so that people in darkness can benefit. And that is a huge responsibility with enormous consequences.

And how do we make the choice to shine? It’s very simple, according to Jesus. We shine when people living in the dark are exposed to our good works. Look at the text. ***“Let your light shine before others so they may see your good works...”***

What does that mean? Does that mean we shine when people see us going to church? Or when they see us pray before a meal at a restaurant? Or when they see us reading our Bibles? Or when they see us preaching on street corners or doing door to door evangelism?

There is nothing wrong with any of these things. But Jesus wasn’t talking about religious activity in verse 16. We will see later in the Sermon on the Mount that He singled out the Pharisees who were “experts” in religious activity—praying, fasting, giving to the poor—and condemned them for it, because they were doing it to be seen by men. They were putting on a religious performance to call attention to themselves, and God wasn’t the least bit impressed.

But neither is Jesus talking about starting and fighting a culture war in America when He admonishes His followers in verse 16 to let their light shine before men that they may see their good works. “Good works” is not a reference to signing petitions, protesting at abortion clinics, lobbying to get prayer reinstated in public schools, keeping the phrase “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance, legislating morality, or electing born again politicians as though God’s agenda for America is that we become a Christian nation. America is not the kingdom of God—it never has been, and it never will be.

Then what are these good works that Jesus is talking about?

He gives us a clue in the last clause of the verse. He says, ***“<sup>16</sup> 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.*”**

*Good works* are things we do that people who observe them associate with God. They may not be able to articulate that it is God *in* us that is enabling us to do them, but at least they can make the connection that what we are doing is a reflection of Him. And these good works are good enough that they are compelled to be impressed with Him. Those good works make Him look good. They call attention to His goodness, His grace, His love, His compassion, His kindness, His generosity, His greatness, His power, His holiness, His righteousness...

That might happen when they see how we husbands love our wives as Christ loved the church. They look at us and say, “Wow, that’s unusual. That’s special. That’s not what I’m used to seeing in marriage relationships. That kind of looks like how I would expect God to love.”

That might happen when they see the way we treat our colleagues at work, even colleagues that gossip about us behind our backs, or have it in for us, or treat us disrespectfully. But they look at our kindness and our graciousness, and they scratch their heads and say, “That’s unusual. That’s really neat. There’s something God-like in the way he is behaving.”

Tangible, concrete good works are simply an outflow of Christ in us, and the possibilities of displaying these good works are endless, because they are supposed to flow

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spontaneously from us all day long, in every circumstance we find ourselves. It's the Holy Spirit expressing the life of Jesus through us.

And what Jesus wants us to know in verse 16 is that the end result of shining before others with our good works is not that we are congratulated for being wonderful people, but that people who see us shine are so impressed with our Father in heaven that they are compelled to give Him glory. They conclude that there is something supernatural in us, that we are somehow connected to this God and we are reflecting His light.

I hope you enjoyed the spectacular full moon this week. The last time there was a full moon I was riding a camel in Cappadocia with my grandson True sitting in front of me, my daughter and wife riding camels beside me. When we started out on that ride at 4:30 in the morning, True said to me, "Grandpa, look at the moon!" It lit up the desert. I was so impressed by the moon's brilliance that I temporarily forgot that when I was looking at the moon I was not seeing the moon's light. Because the moon has no radiant quality in and of itself. What I saw when the moon seemed so bright was reflected light. It was a reflection that came from the source of light—the sun.

We as Christians are a reflection of the glory of Christ. Sometimes we sing a song, "Shine, Jesus, shine; fill this land with the Father's glory." How does Jesus shine? How is this land filled with the Father's glory? According to Jesus in verse 16, it is through you and me and all the other Christ followers in the world. His glory is seen as we reflect it, to the degree that we reflect it.

So what does that look like?

A few years ago our cousin, Bill Krage, died after a long battle with brain cancer. He was a thoroughly committed Christ-follower and a conspicuously godly man. He worked as an engineer in Sacramento on transportation safety, and was extremely successful and respected for his accomplishments. At his memorial service one of his colleagues from work shared about his influence in his department. He said, "Bill came to work as a follower of Jesus disguised as an engineer."

That's what it means to shine. When others can say that the most conspicuous thing about you is Christ in you. We shine when we let Him display His virtues, His values, His attitudes, His traits through us. We shine when we are filled with the Holy Spirit and we display the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We shine when we let Him do through us what He wants to do.

As we treat others as more important than ourselves; as we serve them and put their interests and well-being ahead of our own; as we forgive those who have wronged us; as we, in the words of Isaiah, "loose the chains of injustice...set the oppressed free...share our food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter, and clothe the naked and not turn away from our own flesh and blood, then," he says, "your light will break forth like the dawn" (58:6-8).

Are you shining at your workplace? In your neighborhood or classroom? On your ball team? That's why you're there. You're there to point people to the Way—who is Jesus Christ. You're there to reveal the Truth—who is Jesus Christ. You're there to demonstrate real Life—which is Jesus Christ.

That's the goal. We want people to see something in us and about us that is so attractive that they cannot deny or refute its authenticity. That light is Christ in us, the hope of glory.

**“Public Lights”**  
**Matthew 5:14-16**

**Main Idea:** As the light of the world, Christ followers should be present in places so their shine can benefit many

**Declaration:** “You are the light of the world” (14-15)  
The nature of light—to shine

The benefit of light—to illuminate darkness

The placement of light (14b-15)  
A city on a hill (14b)

A lamp in a home (15)  
The absurdity of covering it

The practicality of putting it on a stand

**Command:** “Let your light shine before men” (16)  
An intentional public display  
The choice to let one’s light shine

The connection between light and good works

Reflected light that points to its Source

**Application:**

As the light of the world, Christ-followers must position themselves in places where they will shine

As the light of the world, Christ followers display the character of Christ