

# ***“You Are the Light of the World”***

**Matthew 5:14-16**

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Four Lakes Church of Christ



## **Introduction:**

If you were here with us last week, you might remember that we discussed a single verse from the Sermon on the Mount—a passage where Jesus described all of us as His followers as being the ***“salt of the earth.”*** We studied the importance of salt in the ancient world, and we discovered that salt was used to preserve, we discovered that salt continues to be used to flavor our food, and we discovered that salt has the ability to make us thirsty. And as we studied, we applied those ideas to our Christian faith.

This morning, I would like for us to move on to the next few verses in **Matthew 5** as we discover that Jesus goes on to describe His followers as being light. On one hand, salt is basically hidden, but on the other hand, light is quite visible. We know from looking at the Scriptures that light is mentioned almost from the very beginning of the Bible. **»PPT»** The Bible starts by saying, ***“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day”*** (**Genesis 1:1-4**). From there, we can skip all the way to the very last book in the Bible, and in **Revelation 22:5** (referring to heaven), the Bible says, ***“And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.”*** And so we have references to light in the first and last chapters of the Bible, and there are more than 250 references in between, because light is incredibly important.

- **»PPT»** In our own experience, probably the sun is the brightest light that any of us have ever seen, although you could perhaps make the case that the brightest light is the bathroom light at 3 o'clock in the morning. We know that the sun is nearly 93 million miles away, its light takes more than 8 minutes to get here, and yet we know that just the light from the sun can blister human skin in less than an hour. We know that sun damage can lead to various kinds of skin cancer. The sun is that bright.
- **»PPT»** The second major source of light here on earth is the moon—reflecting the light of the sun. And although it is nearly 240,000 miles away, the moon has a huge impact on our oceans—causing the tides to rise and fall.

- »PPT» Perhaps we have seen another natural light source, the northern lights. As I understand it, scientists are still not totally agreed as to what causes the northern lights, or the Aurora Borealis—absolutely beautiful.
- »PPT» But closer to earth, we can consider one of many other natural sources of light—the lightning bug or the firefly—a source of fun for children of all ages!
- »PPT» Of course, since the invention of the incandescent light bulb in the mid 1800's, we have been able to use light in ways that people from the past could hardly imagine.
- »PPT» We now have traffic lights—although I am very thankful I have never seen anything like this here in Madison.
- »PPT» The police have lights, and those lights pulling up behind us will normally either make us very mad or very relieved—depending on our behavior.
- »PPT» We have all kinds of warning lights—lights that tell us to check the oil or take the car in for service.
- »PPT» We have headlights—keeping us safe as we drive around at night—helping us to see and be seen.
- »PPT» We have lighthouses along the shore.
- »PPT» We have surgical lights.
- »PPT» And maybe scariest of all, there is that light at the dentist!
- »PPT» After 9-11, we have seen lights used as memorials.
- »PPT» We have artificial lights used for tanning.
- »PPT» We can visit the “City of Lights.”
- »PPT» We understand that a light does not have to be huge to be incredibly important.
- »PPT» We know the importance of a lantern when camping.
- »PPT» We know the importance of the tiny light that allows us to see what time it is in the dark.
- »PPT» Astronauts tell us about looking back down at earth and seeing the city lights.
- »PPT» We are familiar with stadium lights that allow us to see a game played at night.
- »PPT» We know the importance of lights when it comes to various forms of advertising.
- »PPT» And then we are familiar with the lights that are used to lure little critters, and we know that it does not end well for them.
- »PPT» We have seen some beautiful chandeliers, but then again...
- »PPT» ...perhaps there is another light that is more important than anything we have considered—the light that comes on when we open the fridge! Who could do without it?

We live in a world, therefore, that puts a great value on light! This morning, then, I would like for us to consider what Jesus has to say to us as Christians concerning our role as lights in this world. »PPT» If you will, please turn with me to **Matthew 5:14-16**. »PPT» In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1507**. This is what Jesus says in **Matthew 5:14-16**, ***“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.***” This morning, I would like for us to consider the value of light, I’d like for us to consider a special danger that Jesus addresses here, and then I would like for us to close with what Jesus says is the purpose for the light that we shine.

**I. First of all though, let us consider THE VALUE OF LIGHT. ▶PPT▶**

And certainly we understand that almost any light is most appreciated and most needed in the darkness. We look at the statistics, and we discover a significant number of people in all cultures around the world have at least some fear of the dark. And I would suggest that the rest of us are at least a little nervous—and we know why. There are some pretty good reasons to be scared of the dark. Of course, this is probably not something we should tell our children right before bed (I certainly do not recommend that), but there are some good reasons to be scared of the dark.

We know that most violent crimes take place at night or in the dark. I remember an article in the Chicago Tribune several years ago where industrial design students from a school in Alabama were working together with the Chicago Housing Authority to design a vandal-proof light fixture for some of the housing projects down in Chicago. Apparently, there were some 17-story staircases without a single light—no windows and no lights—the stairs were absolutely and completely dark. And we know why. People would steal the bulbs, they would shoot them out, they would light them on fire, they would smash them with baseball bats. We can hardly imagine a mother lugging her groceries up 17 flights of stairs in total darkness. And so the students had developed a bullet-proof, fire-proof, smash-proof, and theft-proof light fixture. The article said that the crime situation improved dramatically. It is amazing what light can do to prevent crime in a neighborhood.

Down in Janesville, we had a problem at the church building where people would try to break in the back of the building late at night—cars would park back there, and kids would make out. Well, we discussed it for a while, and we eventually decided to add a giant spotlight back there. As I remember it, it added a little less than \$20 a month on our utility bill, but the utility company put a 400-watt spotlight up on a pole, and the problems literally disappeared overnight. It was much safer because of the light, because the darkness was a cover for all of the bad things that were going on.

We understand what Jesus said (referring to Himself) in **John 3:19-20**, ***“This is the judgment, 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 will be exposed.”*** It is interesting, then, that the Bible sometimes pictures evil in terms of darkness, and in that regard, the world around us is a very dark place. People all around us are living in the darkness of alcohol abuse, and violence, and lying, and stealing, and murder, and hatred, and prejudice, and all kinds of sexual sin. Our society has declared itself free from God—free from moral restraint.

Jesus, then, says to us as Christians, ***“You are the light of the world.”*** As Christians, we are the ones who bring our light into the darkness. Several weeks ago, I had the privilege of serving as a chaperone on a caving trip with my son’s middle school class. I am not sure what took more courage: Going in a deep, dark cave, or getting on a bus with a bunch of 6<sup>th</sup> graders. Nevertheless, it was dark down there—I mean dark! You could not see your hand in front of your face. But even in that darkness, even the smallest of lights had a huge impact. At one point the group leader had us get our eyes adjusted to total darkness, and then she had those of us with watches push the light button—even the dim light from a watch was brilliant! You could see people’s faces by the light of a single watch! Jesus is saying: You as Christians are that light! You are the light of the world!

As Christians, then, our lives are on display. Our lives serve as an example of what it means to live the Christian life. As Christians, our role is to open the word of God and demonstrate the light of God’s word in a very dark world. The light of God’s word reveals what is dark and sinful. The light of God’s word reveals what is hidden. The light of God’s word reveals the path back to God.

Back in the First Century, homes often had only one room, and everything a family had could be packed away in a chest or a trunk. They had a little oil lamp, and that oil lamp would be kept on top of that chest. That chest served as their kitchen, it served as their table, it served as their place to get together as a family—and that lamp was always there on the table right there in the middle of the room, and that little lamp would light up the whole room. As Christians, then, we are like that little lamp. As the light of the world, we are responsible for leading people back to God. As Paul said in **Philippians 2:14-15** (and as brother Stuart read for us earlier), ***“Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.”*** First of all, then, we see the value of light, because as Christians, we bring light to a very dark world through our example.

**II. As we look back to our passage in Matthew 5, I would like for us to notice at this point A SPECIAL DANGER. »PPT»**

And the danger comes in the temptation to hide our Christian light. Jesus gives two illustrations. First of all, He refers to the fact that, ***“A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”*** I think we’ve all been driving at night and have seen the lights of a far-off city. I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, so I grew up with the red glow—you could always look to the southeast and see the red glow of the big city on the horizon. Perhaps you have had the experience of flying over the ocean. Last year I remember how excited we were to fly over the Atlantic, to stare out into the darkness for hours and hours, and then to suddenly see those city lights 37,000 feet below—to see the cities in Greenland, and Iceland, and then just a short time later in Ireland and England. The light of a city can hardly be hidden. Those lights are very easy to notice in a sea of darkness.

And then Jesus goes on to say (in **verse 15**), ***“Nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket.”*** What a ridiculous picture that is! During my days as a darkroom technician, I got pretty good at sealing light out of a room, and one thing I discovered through experience is that aluminum foil is great at blocking light. And so even if you had a window in a room, you could cover that window with foil, and it would completely seal out any light. But whether we use foil or a bushel basket, it makes no sense to turn on a light and then immediately cover it up—it defeats the purpose of the light! Nevertheless, Jesus appears to say that covering up our light is a real temptation.

Well, how would this express itself? What would this look like in the average Christian? One way we might cover up our Christian light is by separating our spiritual lives from the rest of our lives. It is so easy to divide our lives into categories—we have school, and family, and work, and recreation, and then over here (separate and apart from these others) we have our spiritual lives. And so if I am at work, then that is not a spiritual situation, and I’d better keep quiet. If I am at school, then I can create a barrier there, and I can prevent the influence of my secular life by anything from the spiritual category. But the Lord would say that our Christian light should shine in every situation, in every category. Our Christian influence is not something that we can cover up, but it is always on.

Another strong temptation here is to simply huddle together as Christians to the point where we no longer interact with the world. And certainly it is great to be together as Christians, and we should not miss a minute of that fellowship, but let us not be with each other to the exclusion of interacting with people in the world around us. Studies have suggested that when someone becomes a Christian, that person will no longer have any close friends who are not Christians within a period of about three years. And again, we love being with each other, and that is good, but let us not neglect our relationships with those who are lost. Jesus would compare that to covering up a lamp with a basket. After all, Jesus had friends who were sinful people, and He regularly got together and ate with those who were tax collectors, drunks and sinners. We may be tempted to only spend our time with other Christian people, but Jesus, I believe, would encourage us to get out there and live!

There is another temptation that affects our Christian influence, and it goes back to just about any sin we could possibly commit. We can cover up our Christian light by lying, by committing any kind of sexual sin, by living with jealousy and envy—whatever it is, if we continue in sin, people notice that, and we lose our Christian influence. One of the qualities of light is that light is very different from darkness. And so if people in the world lie, and we lie, there’s no light there—there is no difference. If people in the world cheat on their spouses and get divorced, and if we do the same thing, we are no longer different, and we have lost our ability to light the way. If people in the world do a sloppy job at work and always complain against the supervisors, and if we do the same thing, we have lost our Christian influence.

And so we have the category problem, we have the holy huddle problem, and we have the broken influence problem—all of these things have the potential of putting a basket over our Christian light. Jesus, though, would remind us that there is no on



and off switch, but the light is to be on all the time. Some of us are the only light that some people will ever see—we are the city set on a hill which cannot be hidden. As far as I know, the Bible does not allow someone to be an undercover Christian. But our Christian faith shows in how we treat the clerk at the store, in the way we order a meal at a restaurant, in the way we react to inconveniences, in the way we serve our employees, in the way we dig a trench, in the way we treat the UPS driver, in the way we seal a package on the line, in the way we drive a forklift, and even in the way we drive our car home from work when the day is over. Jesus never told us to be the light of the church, but He told us that we are the light of the world. We may get discouraged and think that our little light won't make a difference, but as we learned from that watch-light in the cave, even a little light can go a long way in a very dark place. We notice, then, that there is a special danger in keeping our light hidden.

### III. Before we close, I'd like for us to go back down to verse 16 as we notice THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE FOR LETTING OUR LIGHT SHINE.

»PPT»

Most of us know what Jesus is about to say in the next chapter—and at first it almost seems contradictory—because three times in Matthew 6, Jesus very sternly warns His disciples not to practice their righteousness to be seen by others—especially when it comes to giving, and praying, and fasting. And so it is a little strange to find that Jesus is basically telling us here in Matthew 5:16 to go out and be noticed. But as with so much of our Christian faith, our motivation is the key. As Jesus puts it in Matthew 5:16, ***“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.”*** In Matthew 6, the Pharisees were praying and fasting so that they would be praised by men, but in Matthew 5:16, Jesus is telling us to let our lights shine so that people will, ***“...glorify your Father who is in heaven.”*** Our motivation makes all the difference in the world! Our goal in living the Christian life in public is not to glorify ourselves but to glorify our Father in heaven.

Our mission is summarized by Peter in 1 Peter 2:9, ***“But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”*** Our goal, then, is to take our light into a dark world so that people will know who God really is.

As I was preparing for this morning's lesson, I ran across a statement apparently made by a Christian in the year 177 AD. The man's name was Athenagoras, and this is what he wrote concerning the Christians of his time, ***“Among us you can find uneducated people, artisans, and dear old mothers who would not be able to put into words the usefulness of their teaching, but by their deeds they demonstrate the usefulness of their principles. They do not repeat words learned by heart, but they show good deeds: When hit they do not hit back, when robbed they do not go to court, they give to those who ask, and they love their fellowmen as themselves.”*** That sounds a lot like the Sermon on the

Mount, doesn't it? Do the people around us know how we take care of each other? Do our friends and neighbors know what life in the New Testament church is like? The purpose of letting our light shine is to glorify our Father in heaven.

### **Conclusion:**

This past week, I read about a Christian woman who was feeling pretty alone at work—she was often ridiculed for her faith and for not participating in some of the things that were going on. She was the only Christian and was accused of being narrow-minded. Finally, she got so discouraged that she was thinking about quitting her job. Before she did that, though, she talked with a Christian friend concerning what she was about to do. After listening to her complaints, the friend asked her, **“Where do people usually put lights?”** She answered, **“In dark places.”** And it was at that point that she decided to stay. I realize that some of you here this morning work in some very dark places. A lot of people are so beaten down during the week that they can hardly make it here every Sunday morning. Your school might be a dark place. Your home and your neighborhood might be a dark place. I hope we have seen this morning that dark places need a light.

A lot of times people get mad at the light—kind of like what happens when someone drives toward us on the highway with the high-beams on. But let's remember that the darker it gets, the easier people can see even a very dim light, and the more good we can do.

It has been said that Benjamin Franklin wanted to interest the people of Philadelphia in street lights. However, he did not try to persuade them with arguments; in fact, he did not even talk about it. Instead, he hung a beautiful lantern on a long bracket right outside his own front door. He kept the brass polished, and he made sure it was lit every night right before the sun went down. It was not too long before his neighbors started doing the same thing, and soon the entire city saw the value of street lights. The moral of that story is this: If we want to brighten the moral darkness all around us here in Madison, we start by letting our own lights shine. As the old saying goes, we can either curse the darkness, or we can light a candle.

If you have not been the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and if you would like for us to pray about that together as a congregation, you can let us know about that as we sing this next song. You can write it down and pass it to the front. If there is anything we need to pray about—if you need the encouragement of your Christian family in some special way, we can pray about that as well.

But on the other hand, if you are not yet a Christian, you can obey the gospel this morning. If you have any questions, you can let us know and we'll study it together right away. We respond to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you are ready to make that life-long commitment right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)