

The Light of the World

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On the day that England went to war in 1914, the Foreign Secretary for the British government, Sir Edward Gray, said as he looked out upon the growing twilight over the city of London, "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our time." Two world wars and a great depression in between proved his words to have been prophetic. In light of the events that have transpired this past week in Afghanistan and to be perfectly honest the things that have been happening all over our country recently, as well as around the world, what Edward Gray said over a century ago, might very well apply to our own day and time. Whether it's the rise of foreign totalitarian regimes, or the fact that it's not even safe to walk the streets of many our own cities, the darkness is growing. Taking stock of what is happening abroad and here at home, it appears that the lights of liberty, freedom and even goodness are being gradually extinguished.

For that reason, I would like to speak to you today about what Jesus said when He told His followers, "You are the light of the world." He spoke these words during His "Sermon on the Mount." It can be found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5 through 7, and taken together, is a comprehensive description of the Christian way of life. If you want to know how we are supposed to live with one another, look no further. It's all there in simple, straight forward language that anyone can understand. And almost at the beginning of this sermon, chapter 5, verses 14-16, Jesus has identified us, God's people, as light bearers to the rest of humanity. Let's take a careful look at what He had to say.

He begins by stating who we are. We are the light of the world. We are the ones who have been called to become a beacon of light in the midst of darkness. But make no mistake, it's not because we possess the light in and of ourselves. A flashlight is nothing more than a piece of plastic or metal, until the batteries are installed. Then and only then, does the flashlight actually work, producing light. The same is true for you and me. There is no light, no evidence of God's radiance, until He enters our lives and fills us with His Spirit. It's what took place on the Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church. Seven days after Jesus' ascension into heaven, what He had promised His disciples came to pass. He said they would be filled with the Holy Spirit and they were, tongues of fire alighting upon each of them as a mighty wind coursed through the dwelling where they had been praying. Then and only then were they filled with the light of God, a light that radiated forth in everything that they said and did. As Paul said in his second letter to the Corinthians, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

We light up when the flame of God's presence touches our lives. It takes place at the moment of our conversion when we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior. It may occur at a later time, when, for example, we surrender to the lordship of Christ in our lives. It may be a gentle glow that radiates from within us, or a burning brilliance that compels us to share the love of God with others. But no matter when or how it bursts forth from our lives, we cannot be the light of the

world until we are lit by God's light. I shall never forget the radiant face of the young woman who came knocking on the door to my office at church. My friend, Bill Steelman, and I had witnessed to her the night before. She was interested, but not yet ready to make a personal commitment to become a Christian. That morning she had been listening to a pastor on the radio who said the same things we had spoken of the previous evening. Right there, with her hands in the dishwasher washing the breakfast dishes, she gave her heart to Christ. Her face aglow, she said, "I'm so happy. I just had to come and tell somebody about what happened." It may not be as dramatic as her salvation experience, but I hope that at some point in your life you have come to the realization that you have been lit by the light of God, and that now you have a new purpose. You are God's light to all of the world around you.

Because you are God's light, Jesus then declares, "You are like a city on a hilltop. You cannot be hidden." My father's family lived in Hampton Roads, in the city of Portsmouth, during the Second World War. Early on, Nazi submarines were sinking scores of ships along the coast of Virginia because they were being silhouetted by the lights of the cities on the shoreline. An order went out that every home had to either turn off their lights at dusk or put blackout curtains across their windows. My grandmother thought that was foolishness and refused to comply. The local air raid warden stopped by and told grandmother to turn off her lights or cover the windows. A little while later he returned and seeing the lights still on warned her again. When he returned the third time and the lights were still on, he said, "Mrs. Parker, you have a choice. Turn off the lights or go to jail." She turned off the lights.

It's hard to hide the lights of a city and likewise it's just about impossible to hide the light that radiates from the life of a Christian. Remember the Old Testament story about Moses when he came down from the mountain having met with God. It's found in Exodus 34:29-35. His countenance was aglow with the glory of the Lord, so much so that he would cover his face with a veil, because the people were frightened by his radiant countenance. Now I don't know about you, but I have met people who possessed that kind of radiance and it was impossible to hide. Fortunately, it wasn't scary. In fact, it was just the opposite. It was winsome. People were drawn to it. One of those people was a man named "Red." As a younger man he had bright red hair. He was now getting along in years and had recently been diagnosed with a cancerous blood disorder which required occasional hospitalizations. He was a radiant Christian in a gentle, loving, kind-hearted way. So much so that the hospital staff, nurses and doctors alike, almost looked forward to seeing him when he returned for treatment. In spite of his illness, he reached out with a life filled joyfulness that in no way resembled the fact that he knew the cancer would eventually take his life. He was like a city on a hilltop whose light cannot be hidden. How about you? Does your life possess a glow that is simply irrepressible?

Jesus also had something else to say about the light which resides within His people. It is absolutely useless unless it is visible. When my son, Tim, was a little boy, we bought a lamp for his room with a beautiful lamp shade. The lampshade possessed a marvelous design, as best as I can remember, a number of lighthouses inscribed upon it. There was only one problem. The lampshade was so thick, that it concealed all the light. You couldn't see a thing. Jesus was confirming that observation when He said, "You don't light a lamp and hide it under a bowl." I can

almost hear Him saying, "That doesn't make any sense at all." Rather, as indeed He did say, "You put it on a lamp stand where it can provide light for everyone in the house."

Nevertheless, that's what I'm afraid we do all too often as Christians. We hide the light of God's presence in our lives for fear that someone will see it and ridicule or make fun of us. We don't really want to stand out in such a way that others will clearly recognize our distinctive difference. For example, we say to ourselves, "Well, it's none of our business," when we could throw a little light upon a situation where someone is being taken advantage of. Or we refuse to speak up when issues arise that need to be addressed from a Christian point of view. Or we're afraid to share our faith with someone who desperately needs to experience the saving grace of God. Years ago I came across a brochure called, "Survival Kit for New Christians." It was based upon the idea that becoming a Christian is like going on a back packing trip. Several stages or plateaus along this journey were described. One of those was the, "Silent Christian Stage." Beside the wording for this stage, there was a cartoon like picture of a group of people with great big band aids covering their mouths. I thought to myself, "That pretty well sums up where a lot of Christians reside. They are either unwilling or unable to share their faith." For that reason we need to be reminded of what Paul had to say. Speaking to the Christians in the city of Philippi, he said that they should, "shine like the stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life" (Philippians 2:15-16). In other words, we have a responsibility to let God's light shine through our lives as we tell others about Him. How about you and me? Are we like shining stars or do we more nearly resemble those black holes in the universe which swallow up everything, even light itself?

Finally, Jesus has one more thing to say to us this morning. He declares, "Let your light so shine before men that they will see your good deeds and praise your Father who is in heaven." If you have ever been to a play or drama, perhaps even one right here at church, you probably noticed that there was a spotlight. So let me ask you this question. Did it shine on itself or on the actors who were on the stage? You, of course, know the answer. It shined on the actors. That's what it's supposed to do, illuminating the scene that the audience is viewing. The same is true for you and me. Living the Christian way of life, being God's light in this world, is not about receiving praise and honor for ourselves, in fact, not even recognition. It's about bringing glory to God through what we do and say and how we live. It's about shining a spotlight on the goodness and redeeming love of the Lord Jesus Christ through our actions and our attitudes.

Perhaps this story will illustrate what I'm trying to say. In a distant community there was an individual who ran a notorious bar. Besides alcohol there were a lot of other things that transpired within the walls of that building, most of them of a very unsavory nature. Everyone sort of knew what went on, but were powerless to do anything about it. The owner had an exceedingly bad reputation and even though he had been invited on numerous occasions, he never darkened the door of the neighborhood church. In fact, he had been known to say, "I'm never going to associate with those Bible thumping hypocrites." Afflicted by a severe heart attack, he was sent home from the hospital with strict orders to stay inside and not be involved in any strenuous activity. That, of course, included cutting the grass in the front lawn of his luxurious home. It had grown tall during his time in the hospital. Recognizing this situation and desiring to reach out to this rather

undesirable individual, the pastor of that local church came up with an idea. He and his son drove to the bar owner's home, unloaded their lawn mowers and proceeded to cut the man's grass. They saw him looking out from his upstairs balcony, but didn't say anything, didn't even introduce themselves, just went about their work and departed. Several weeks later an astonishing thing took place. The man who owned the bar came to church and he kept on coming. He eventually closed the bar and gave his life to the Lord. A good deed, done without a desire for recognition, brought honor and glory to God, a lost sinner who was redeemed by the Lord. As Peter declared in his first letter, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you doing wrong, they may see your good deeds, and glorify God on the day He visits us" (1 Peter 2:12).

Robert Louis Stevenson, the well-known author of many famous books like *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, was a rather sickly little boy growing up in Edenborough, Scotland. One night he was sitting on a window sill at his home, when he saw something that captured his attention. A lamplighter was lighting each of the lamps along the street where he lived. At each street lamp the lamplighter would climb a short ladder, open the lens of the light fixture, and then touch the wick with the flame he carried. Seeing their son so completely enthralled, his parents asked, "Robert, what are you looking at?" Young Robert replied, "Mom, Dad, there's a man coming down the street punching holes in the darkness."

Yes, my friends, nighttime is coming. The shadows are lengthening and the daylight is waning. Nevertheless, we have work to do. We, who call ourselves Christians, must be the lamplighters of God's glory, punching holes in the darkness.