

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, March 6, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:14-16

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #10
A CITY ON A HILL

Washington D. C. is a beautiful city. Of all of the places that Cyndi and I have lived, D.C. is the spot that brought us the most visitors. Friends and family from all over the country wanted to visit us in that place because there is something special about our nation’s capitol. When visitors would come we usually made a day out of visiting the sites. No visit was complete without a tour of the U.S. Capitol Building, a walk to the White House, a visit to at least one of the Smithsonian Museums, and a walk down the mall from the Capitol to the Lincoln Memorial. By the end of the day, we had walked miles, were exhausted, and had great stories to tell.

We always told our visitors that D. C. was not a city that could be appreciated in one day. It took at least several days to do a visit any justice. Any friends who came to Washington D. C. hoping to pack it all in, in 24 hours, were sorely disappointed. Invariably our friends would tell us that their favorite part of the visit was when the sun set and the lights of the Capitol City came on. Washington, more than any other city, is beautiful at night. It is also bright. There are more lights illuminating the monuments and buildings of our capitol than most of the places that I have been.

When I would take my students out of D. C. for a few nights in the mountains of West Virginia or Pennsylvania, they would invariably talk about how bright the stars were. The lights of the city drowned out many of the stars in the sky. We see a similar thing here in the suburban Twin Cities. The impact of the lights of St. Paul and Minneapolis can sometimes drown out the stars in our sky. And, when we visit a cabin up north, we too are blown away at how much brighter the sky is when away from the city lights.

Now, imagine what it would have been like to live prior to the twentieth century. It was in 1802 that Humphrey Davy, a British scientist, created the first incandescent light. It wasn’t bright enough nor did it last long enough to be something that could be used in any practical way. But, Davy’s breakthrough paved the way for Thomas Edison and many other scientists to work on perfecting the incandescent light. It was on October 22, 1879 that Edison was able to get a carbon filament to generate enough heat to produce light for an extended period time. His light burned for forty hours, and a breakthrough had been made. In just a few years incandescent light bulbs would be installed in buildings. The

Mahen Theater in Brno, Czech Republic would be the first public building in the world to install electric lamps. In 2010 a light bulb monument was placed outside the Theater to commemorate the building's unique history. By the end of the nineteenth century, grand public displays of lighting drew visitors to festivals all over the world. The light bulb has rightly been called one of the greatest inventions of all time.

Now, I want you to think back to what it would have been like to hear Jesus talk about the topic of light to his first century followers. There was no light bulb. Electric currents, needed in order for a light bulb to work wouldn't be discovered for another 1800 years. When the disciples heard Jesus speak about light they would have thought in terms of fire, stars, the sun and moon, and the temple in Jerusalem.

Before we get to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, I want to turn your attention to one of the most significant pronouncements that Jesus ever made. Christ's timing in making His statement was spectacular. Every year, the Jewish people celebrate Sukkot. It is one of three festivals that God mandated for the Jewish people to celebrate. It commemorates the way that God provided for His people during the forty years of wandering in the desert. Part of the celebration includes building temporary dwellings, or sukkah, similar to those dwellings that the Children of Israel would have lived in during those 40 years. The temple in Jerusalem had a beautiful ceremony that took place during Sukkot every year called the Illumination of the Temple. Located in the temple treasury were four giant golden candelabra. Each of these were as tall as the highest walls in the temple. Kent Hughes writes, "at the top of these candelabra were mounted great bowls that held sixty-five liters of oil. There was a ladder for each candelabrum, and when evening came, healthy young priests would carry oil up to the great bowls and light the protruding wicks. Eyewitnesses said that the huge flames that leapt from these torches illuminated not only the temple but all of Jerusalem. . . the exotic fire rite celebrated the great pillar of fire (the glorious cloud of God's presence) that led the people of Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness and spread its fiery billows over the tabernacle.

It was in the temple treasury the following morning, with charred torches still in place, that Jesus lifted his voice above the crowd and proclaimed, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). There could scarcely be a more emphatic way to announce one of the supreme truths of his existence. Christ was saying in effect, 'The pillar of fire that came between you and the Egyptians, the cloud that guided you by day in the wilderness and illuminated the night and enveloped the tabernacle, the glorious cloud that filled Solomon's temple – that was me!' Jesus is the light of the world! He is everything suggested by the storied cloud of glory. Moreover, he is everything suggested by the glowing metaphor of light – and much more. The great fact that he is the light of the world is foundational to our thinking and must control it as we examine the unforgettable words of Matthew 5:14-16."¹

¹ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), pp. 83-84.

Is anybody else getting chills here? Do you understand what Jesus said to those in the temple, and the significance of when He said it? Jesus Christ is the great light of the world. This means that our world, apart from Christ, is a dark place! The spiritual metaphor of light and dark is something that is taught throughout the Bible. In Psalm 139:7-12 we read the Psalmists words about the futility of trying to hide from God.

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

The darkness of the world, and the darkness of sin cannot hide us from the Light of the World! We, like all who have ever lived, need Jesus. We need His light to penetrate our souls. We need Christ to expose us for who we really are. We need to Him to reach into those places where we don't allow anyone else to go. We need Him to cleanse us. But, so many of us refuse to allow Him to do His work!

In John 3:16-21, Jesus spoke profound truth about the Light of the World. He said, ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Did you catch verse 19? Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of the light because their deeds were evil. What a sad commentary on the state of the world without Christ. And I know that many of us in this room have been there. We walked for years intentionally embracing the darkness instead of the light. Some of us are still amazed that even though Christ is Lord, we choose from time to time to embrace a route that will

lead to misery, instead of choosing to walk with Christ, which is one of the things that makes His statement to the disciples in Matthew 5:14, so extraordinary.

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.

Wait a minute! Jesus said in John 8:12 that He is the light of the world. Now He is calling His disciples the light of the world? How does that work? How can Jesus be the light of the world and His disciples be the light of the world.

And, like everything else Christ has taught so far in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus calls the disciples the light of the world, He is doing so emphatically. You and you alone are the light of the world. There is no one else who is the light of the world!

Friends, do you realize how much faith God has in you? Are you beginning to see that He thinks so much more highly of us than we think of ourselves? He sees the best in you. He sees what you can be. He sees the impact that you can and should be having on this world.

Donald Grey Barnhouse answers the puzzle of how Jesus can call Himself the light of the world and his disciples the light of the world. “When Christ was in the world, he was like the shining sun that is here in the day and gone at night. When the sun sets, the moon comes up. The moon, the church, shines but not with its own light. It shines with reflected light. When Jesus was in the world he said, ‘I am the light of the world.’ But as he contemplated leaving the world, he said, ‘You are the light of the world.’ At times the church has been a full moon, dazzling the world with an almost daytime light. These have been times of great enlightenment, times such as those of Paul and Luther and Wesley. And at other times the church has been only a thumbnail moon, with very little light shining upon the earth. Whether the church is a full moon or a new thumbnail moon, waxing or waning, it reflects the light of the sun.”²

It’s a beautiful picture isn’t it? What a difference Christ makes in our life! He takes those who are spiritual beggars and turns us into those who reflect Christ to the world around us. So, are you shining that light? Do people see the reflection of Christ in you?

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

Christ told his disciples that they were the light of the world and then began to describe how that practically lives itself out. Using two descriptions from everyday life, Jesus showed His disciples the impact that being a spiritual light brings.

The first example that Christ gave was that of a city on a hill cannot be hidden. This is one of the first descriptions that Jesus chooses to give of the church. I have a friend who was

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), p. 80.

so moved by Jesus' words here, that when he planted the church he pastors in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, he called it City on a Hill Fellowship.

I spent a summer in Hawaii when I was in college. We were based on the island of Molokai, which at the time only had 5000 inhabitants and no real large city. There was a spot on Molokai where you could look across the ocean and see the island of Maui, with its larger cities, and exciting nightlife. I'll never forget one night, as I was reading my Bible and came across Matthew 5:13-16. There was little man made light around us, but the sky was beautiful with a full moon, and thousands of stars. And across the ocean you could see the volcanic island of Maui, with its cities built on hills and lit up for miles. There was no way to hide that city. I preached one of my first sermons ever that night. I'll never forget it. I had a chance to preach to about forty students, many who had trusted Jesus as their Savior that week about what it meant to live as salt and light. And as we looked across the ocean at Maui and saw a city on a hill, the students were able to identify with the words of Christ. There should never be such a thing as an invisible follower of Jesus Christ. We have been called to shine bright in our generation for Christ.

Anyone listening to Jesus' words in the first century would have immediately thought about the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is literally a city on a hill. Everyone in Israel goes "up" to Jerusalem. It doesn't matter if you are coming from the north, south, east or west, you go up to Jerusalem. David picked Jerusalem as his capitol city because of the way that it could be strategically defended against invading armies. The disciples listening to Jesus would have recognized the importance of being like Jerusalem. They were to live out their faith in a pronounced and a prominent way.

Jesus gave a second description from everyday life about being the light of the world in verse fifteen. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.

Christians are like a household lamp. In the first century home an oil lamp was lit to bring light to a home. Jesus spoke about how foolish it would be to place that lamp under a bowl. The fire would be extinguished and the light would cease to shine. A lamp was put on a stand and it brought light to everyone in the home.

A little bit of light goes a long way. Let me give you three things that light will bring.

- 1) Light clarifies – It brings that which is dim into focus. Your life helps clarify truth from fiction. We are eternal beings, created by an eternal God who longs to spend eternity with us. Heaven is but a dim reality to those of us living on earth, and yet as Christians we can help people see what heaven will be like, by living as Christ's saints on earth today.
- 2) Light reveals – If you've ever been in a strange place in the dark, everything can seem distorted. Harmless things can become scary when we don't know what they are. But, things that are scary in the dark aren't so scary when the light reveals

them. How many of us as parents have been awoken in the night because of the hideous creature under the bed or closet only to show our children that when the light is turned on it is just a shadow, or a box, or a toy? As Christians, our lives reveal the truth of God to the world around us.

- 3) Light brightens – We live in a dark world. Just turn on your television set. Watch the evening news. We have an opportunity to brighten a dark world. Christians ought to be the best neighbors, best employees, best spouses, best parents, and more because we have the light of Christ within us.

I read an illustration about a poor little boy, who once heard his Sunday School teacher say that Jesus was the light of the world. He took her remark quite literally. After class, the boy said to his teacher, “If Jesus really is the light of the world, I wish He'd come hang out in my alley. It's awful dark where I live.”³

And that's what Christ wants us to do. We are called to hang out in the dark alleys of this world. Jesus said, ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Isn't it amazing that we get to be a part of that great calling? Jesus Christ has entrusted His church with the great responsibility of reflecting Him. The Apostle Paul marveled at this truth in Ephesians 5:8, “⁸ For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.”

I love a sentence that Kent Hughes wrote in his book, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*. He writes, “If you want to shine in the night, keep your eye on the Light.”

So, if we are going to live out Matthew 5:16, we need to keep our eye on the light. Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Wouldn't it be great if the people around you began spontaneously praising God because of how they see Him reflected in you? If you want to shine in the night, keep your eye on the Light.

In the summer of 2009, I had a chance to speak for the first time at Camp Lebanon's Family Camp. It was an incredible week, highlighted for me when an entire family came to faith in Jesus Christ. I'll never forget sharing the Gospel and seeing Wes, Ann, and both of their daughters raising their hands signifying that they had prayed to received Christ as their Savior.

³<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:LslzloVEQIJ:elbourne.org/sermons/index.mv%3Fillustration%2B4036+sermon+illustration+light+of+the+world&cd=5&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&source=www.google.com>

Last summer I had a chance to speak again at Family Camp. Wes and Ann were there and Ann couldn't wait to tell me what a difference that Christ had made in her husband's life. When we announced that we were moving to Lake Elmo, Wes and Ann asked if they could be in our small group when we started one, because they live just a few miles away. I've got to tell you, I love being in small group with the Flors.

Wes is on fire for Jesus Christ. He is someone who understands what it means to be light in his world. Two weeks ago, while meeting in our group, Ann nudged Wes and said, "You've got to share what happened to you today." Wes kind of hemmed and hawed, but she insisted that he tell the story. He said, "Our church has been talking about stewardship, and as part of the series they encouraged everyone in the congregation to give away \$20 this week. We were supposed to find a way to use \$20 to be a blessing in someone else's life this week. Well, I was getting my tires changed today, and I saw a guy at the counter haggling over the price of his repair. The repair shop told the man that he needed new brakes and some other work done on his car. He only had \$40 and had come in for a different problem. The man said, 'I can't pay for those repairs. Just fix what I came in for.' The manager of the shop said, 'I just don't feel right about sending you on the road with your car. It's a danger to you and others. Your brakes are really, really bad.' The guy said, 'You don't understand. I only have \$40. I can't get my brakes fixed. Just fix what you can for \$40.'"

It was at this point that Wes said that he started shaking. He knew God was telling him to pay for the man's repairs. Wes has a little construction company and the economy hasn't been great for construction. He doesn't have a lot of disposable income. But, he couldn't shake the feeling that God was telling him to pay for this man's repairs. So, he went to the manager of the shop and asked, "Can I talk with you outside?"

"I want to pay for the repairs for that man's car. What is wrong with it and how much will it cost?"

The store manager was shocked. He said, "In twenty years of working here, I've never seen someone offer to pay for another person's car repair. This is going to cost over \$200. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes. I'm sure," said Wes.

"Well, let me talk to the owner of the shop. Maybe we can split the cost with you."

The store manager then went to talk to the owner of the shop. He explained the situation about the man who needed his car fixed and the stranger who wanted to pay for the repair. He then asked the owner of the shop if they could split the cost of the repair. The owner said, "Yes."

Then, the manager called the guy who needed the repair up to the counter. He said, "There is a man here who wants to pay for your car repair. So, your brakes and the other

minor jobs will be taken care of.” The man said, “Is it that guy you were talking to outside?” The manager said, “Yes.”

At that point the man who was being taken care of came over to Wes and said, “I don’t know what to say. Thank you. My wife and I both work fulltime, but our hours have been cut back to 30 hours a week. We can hardly pay our bills. You have restored my hope in humanity.”

Wes then told him something about Christ’s love and paid the bill. Wes is a baby Christian, but his light is shining bright. I’m convinced that is because Wes is keeping his eye on the Light.

So what about you? Want to shine bright? There are a myriad of ways to do so. One way might be to volunteer with our refugee ministry. You not only make an impact on the refugee family that immigrates to our country, but you make an impact on neighbors and co-workers as they ask you why you volunteer your time with refugees.

Maybe you’ll choose to do something like Wes, and come alongside someone with a financial need. Maybe you’ll volunteer once a week at a retirement center. Maybe you can invite a neighbor over for dinner or volunteer to help your child’s teacher grade papers. There are countless ways to let your light shine. And, in doing so you reflect Christ.

In Matthew 13:43, Jesus said, “⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” Kent Hughes writes, “That is us – you and me! How can that be? I am not sure. C. S. Lewis once noted that the heavens only reflect or suggest the glory of God. But we *share* the glory of the Father with Christ. And we will be more glorious than the heavens. Lewis says:

Nature is mortal. We shall outlive her. When all the suns and nebulae have passed away, each of you will still be alive. Nature is only the image, the symbol . . . We are summoned to pass in through nature beyond her to the splendor which she fitfully reflects.

I believe that with all my heart. I do not understand it, but I believe that for us as Christians there is a glory awaiting us that involves, in some way, an even greater shining forth. I do not know if we will be 100 watts or 200, 300 or 1,000! We might be like fireflies or we might be like supernovas. But somehow we are going to enter into the fame and approval of God, and we will be glorious beings, far beyond all imagination.

But at the same time we are light right now. Jesus says, ‘You [you alone] are the light of the world.’ Let us covenant with all our being to shine as brightly as possible in this dark world. Let us covenant to expose ourselves to the face of Jesus in prayer. Let us covenant to be visible for him. Let us covenant to shine wherever he places us. Let us covenant to

be beautiful works. Let us covenant to remind ourselves that we always will be light – and to live in that reality.”⁴

Well said! May that be our prayer and our promise!

⁴ Hughes, pp. 88-89