

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: January 29, 2017
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE LIGHT”
Matthew 5:13-16

☑ {Sir Edward Gray} This morning we are exulting in the light of God. Yet it seems that night is falling, and **“The [lights] are going out all over.”**

{Jn 3:19} **“People [have] loved darkness *instead of light.*”** Our city, our nation, our species is plunging further into the gloom of immorality, injustice, and idolatry.

? Where is the light?

A little bit of it is here in this room. I am looking at it.

■ Please turn with me to Matthew 5:14. God the Son announces, **“You are the light of the world.”**

“You,” impulsive Simon Peter, the bigmouth who talks without thinking, **“are the light of the world.”**

“You,” hotheaded James and John, who demand the places of honor, **“are the light of the world.”**

“You,” cynical Thomas, terrified of believing what you cannot understand, **“are the light of the world.”**

“You,” Mary and Joanna and Susanna, whom everyone except Jesus treats as *less than* because of your gender, **“are the light of the world.”**

“You,” Christ Followers in first century Palestine, in twenty-first century North America, in every time and place **“are the light of the world.”**

Where is the light? It is embodied in the people of God wherever, whenever, whoever they are.

{I Tim 6:15; Ps 104:2; I Jn 1:5} This is a breathtaking affirmation, is it not? Especially in light of what we have declared today: YHWH “[lives] in unapproachable light,” **“The LORD wraps himself in light,”** **“God is light.”** And to *this*, Messiah adds: **“You are the light!”**

Take a look around at your brothers and sisters. Now, envision others in countless congregations, with diverse skin colors, speaking different languages, in every nation. We **“are the light of the world.”**

■ However, Christ Jesus does not stop there. Matthew 5:16: **“Let your light shine before others.”**

📖 Λαμψατω [lampátō] is the imperative form of the Greek verb λαμπω [lámō], to shine. This is not a suggestion, it is a command: {CEV; TEV; Msg} **“Make your light shine.”** **“Your light must shine.”** **“Shine!”**

? After all, what is light for if not to **“shine”**? Radiating light is its critical function.

■ Thus, people don’t **“light a lamp and put it under a bowl,”** verse 15. **“Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”**

? So why does the Lord exhort his followers to shine? Why would he need to do so?

Messiah orders us to shine because sometimes we don’t. The Church does not always illuminate the world.

We reduce the light when we soft-pedal the Gospel, and also when we beat people over the head with it.

We decrease the light when we exchange grace for legalism on the one hand, or licentiousness on the other.

We dim the light when we pin our hopes on partisan politics, reimagining Jesus as an elephant or a donkey.

We lower the light when we mistake patriotism for Christianity, as though God wraps himself in our flag.

We diminish the light when we turn a blind eye to materialism, greed, racism, misogyny, and militarism. When we actively promote these sins, as the Church has all too frequently done, we nearly quench the light.

This isn't only about 'them' in other denominations and faith traditions. It is equally about 'us' Evangelicals, us Pietists, us Covenanters, us people of the Word.

It is not inevitable that we will **“shine before others.”** Hence, the Lord commands it.

□ **“You are the light of the world ... let your light shine.”**

? The question is how? How shall we **“shine before others”**? How shall we **“shine ... like stars in the sky”** (Philippians 2:15)?

↙ First, to **“shine”** we must be **“the light.”**

Christ starts with **“You are the light of the world,”** then moves on to **“let your light shine.”** Being precedes doing.

? But what does it mean to be **“the light”**? Let's begin by addressing what it does not mean.

★ {Mt 7:21} Saying “Jesus is Lord” does not make us **“the light.”** Messiah warns that **“Not everyone who [calls] me ‘Lord ...’ will enter the kingdom ...”**

{Jas 2:19} Accepting biblical truths about God does not make us **“the light.”** **“Even the demons believe that – and shudder.”**

{Mt 13:24-30} Joining a church does not make us **“the light.”** Some members are true, others are false, and it can be very difficult to tell the two apart.

★ Now for the positive.

To be **“the light”** is to be reconciled to God the Father and indwelt by God the Spirit through deep, redemptive, life-giving union with God the Son.

{Gal 4:5-6} To be **“the light”** is to **“receive”** divine **“adoption,”** thereby becoming children of God who **“by the Spirit of his Son”** call out **“Abba, Father.”**

{Eph 2:22; Gal 2:20} To be **“the light”** is to be **“a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”** It is to be **“crucified with Christ”** so that it is **“no longer”** we who **“live, but Christ lives in”** us.

{Ro 12:2; 8:29} To be **“the light”** is to be **“transformed by the renewing of your mind,”** **“conformed to the image of [the Son], that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”**

How this begins in different individuals, no one can say. We enter the light in various ways.

{Jn 3:7} Some feel an emotional tug at Bible camp or a revival service. We raise our hand or come forward to the altar, and are **“born again.”**

{Jn 3:8} Some are going about their humdrum routine when they are inexplicably enlightened. We realize the truth of the Gospel, and are **“born of the Spirit.”**

{II Co 5:17} Some are trapped in a life-threatening crisis. We cry out in desperation, God reaches down to rescue us, and behold! **“A new creation has come.”**

What is always the same is that the Spirit draws us to the Son. He beckons us into Communion with the Son. He fills us with the life of the Son.

{Jn 1:9; Lk 11:34} Until this happens, we are *not yet* **“the light,”** for Christ is the one and only **“true light.”** He alone is mighty to open our spiritual eyes and make our **“whole body ... full of light.”**

To **“shine”** we must be **“the light.”** That is the condition of being.

✈ {Jn 8:12} Second, we must radiate **“the light”** out into the world, exuding good words and good deeds.

? It is comfortable inside these walls. We don't often venture out into the neighborhood. Has Christ given us his light mainly for our personal benefit?

? Some of us stay in narrow Christian circles. We seldom share life with the unchurched. Are we afraid of the darkness, that it will overcome the light inside us?

★ Matthew 28:18-20 records Messiah's final words before his Ascension. This is the Great Commission:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have

commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

So it is with us: the vital mission of Beverly Covenant Church is to make new disciples, and to go deeper in discipleship ourselves. This won't happen unless we shine **“the light”** into the world. We do that by exuding good words and good deeds.

? But what words are good? What deeds are best?

★ Matthew 22:36-40 records the Great Commandments. Messiah proclaimed: **“All the Law and the Prophets hang on...two commandments”**: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”**; and **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

“God is love” (First John 4:8). It follows that our words and deeds which radiate his light are those that are generated and empowered by αγαπη [agapē] love.

The Great Commission and Great Commandments define our mission and the manner in which we are to serve it. Consider the example set for us by Christ Jesus.

✠ {Mt 4:18} He reached out. He went out to the streets, to the waterfront, to where the people were. Other rabbis waited for potential disciples to come and apply to study with them; Jesus went out and said, **“Come, follow me.”**

✠ He included everyone. He spoke with Pharisees. He rubbed elbows with the poor and downtrodden. He befriended women. He broke bread with tax collectors and sinners. Many rejected Jesus; but he excluded no one.

✠ He dignified everyone. He called out sin, but never humiliated the sinner. He did not treat people as stereotypes. He gave his attention to children. He spoke to women as equals. He touched lepers.

✠ He was merciful. Jesus healed the innocent and the guilty, fed the worthy and the undeserving. He forgave those who sinned against him, prayed for his persecutors, and literally turned the other cheek.

✠ He gave freely. He gave time, energy, wisdom, and concern to the crowds. He shared his joy, sorrow, and frustration with his friends. He accepted gifts, but he gave without demanding anything in return.

✠ He protected the mission but sacrificed himself. He mingled with outcasts, knowing it would harm his reputation. He healed on the Sabbath, knowing it would offend the Pharisees. He cleansed the Temple, knowing it would trigger his crucifixion. When he did withdraw from a conflict it was always to advance the mission, never to save his own skin.

That is not all to be said. But that is enough for us to start with!

To “**shine**” we must radiate “**the light**” out into the world, exuding good words and good deeds. That is the condition of doing.

☑ “**The [lights] are going out all over.**” “**People [have] loved darkness *instead of* light.**”

? Where is the light? I am looking at some of it.

■ “**You are the light of the world Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.**”