

## The King Who Shines his Light through Us

Matthew 5:11-16

We've been in the Gospel of Matthew for several months, one of the four books at the beginning of the New Testament that tell the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. How the plan of God for all time, how the hope of his covenant people Israel, and of all nations, how the deepest problems with humanity and the fallen world all come together to find their answer and fulfillment in Jesus Christ, who was born King of the Jews and later crucified King of the Jews, yet to whom belongs all authority in heaven and on earth.

The part of the story we're in right now, Jesus has just begun to establish God's kingdom on earth—the rule and reign of God, whereby he is making all things new. And in Matthew 5–7 we have what's called the Sermon on the Mount—a collection of Jesus' teaching about what life looks like as part of God's Kingdom, under Jesus' authority.

Just before Easter we looked at the first ten verses of this Sermon, called the Beatitudes, which outline *the blessings of life under God's reign*. We talked about how the Beatitudes are not so much a *how-to manual* for living in God's kingdom (though that's how we often treat them), but much more like a *family portrait*. In other words, Jesus didn't say there, "Go do this, then go do that." Instead he showed us a picture. "This is what life looks like when you're part of my family, when you belong to my kingdom, when you live under my reign. This is what true joy and comfort look like—the kind that are able to withstand the pain and sorrow of life in a fallen world."

It looks like poverty of spirit, a brokenness that mourns over sin and knows our need for Jesus. It looks like meekness that trusts God to be in control, yet hungers and thirsts for all to be made right. It looks like mercy and purity of heart, not being divided or diluted by the world. It looks like peacemaking, just as God offers peace to us through Jesus. And, because living under God's reign means our allegiance is to Jesus as King, and not primarily to the powers here around us, it looks like persecution, when the world doesn't want Jesus or his authority, or anything related to him. These are the kinds of people to whom God's kingdom belongs. This is the family portrait.

This morning, as we come to vv. 11-16, the question we need to ask is: What's the family portrait *for*? What is God doing with it? Why does it matter that God's people look like this?

There are two ways to treat a family picture in your home. One is to treat it as a memory to be held onto and locked away. We print it on a 4x6 piece of paper and keep it in a photo album under the coffee table, or in a scrapbook in the closet, or maybe a box or a drawer. Every now and then we pull it out and smile as we remember that time, maybe laugh at what we were wearing. And then eventually we put it away and go on again with life. That picture exists just for us and our personal nostalgia.

And then there's the kind of family portrait that gets printed on a 20x24 canvas, with a handsome frame around it. And that portrait gets hung in some prominent place in the house, over the fireplace, or maybe in the dining room. That picture's not just for personal nostalgia—that portrait is displayed for all to see. It's a celebration of your family and what they look like, for others to see and enjoy and admire.

That's the purpose of the family portrait we saw in the Beatitudes. It's not just a personal checklist of how I'm doing with God, or a private reminder of how blessed we are to have Jesus. It's a picture that God wants to put on display for the whole world to see.

As Jesus transitions from describing the family portrait in vv. 1-10 (“Blessed are *those* . . .”) and begins directly addressing his followers in v. 11 (“Blessed are *you*”) and v. 13 and 14 (“*You* are . . .”), notice the scope of who he wants to impact by his people. Verse 13: “You are the salt of the *earth* . . .” Not just Jerusalem, or Judea, but the whole earth. Verse 14: “You are the light of the *world* . . .” *God's people have a mission to show the whole world what God is like.* To display for the whole world the beauty and power and holiness and love and grace of King Jesus.

So as we look at this passage this morning, I invite you to ask yourselves, what is it that the watching world sees in us—in the way we live, what we do, what we say? Can they get close enough to us to see anything? And when they see us, do they see Jesus, or something else?

### **A People with a Mission**

God's people are a people with a mission. Jesus says to his followers in v. 14, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” Now the church is not the first people to be described this way. For starters, God is light, according to 1 John 1:5 and other passages (cf. Ps. 18:12; 1 Tim. 6:16). And he seeks to shine his light through his people. Even ancient Israel was called to be “a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Isa. 42:6-7). The problem was that those who were supposed to open blind eyes became blind themselves (Isa. 42:19). “The light-bearers had become part of the darkness.”<sup>1</sup> And so Jesus, as God in the flesh, and as True Israel, comes, John 1 tells us, as “the true light that gives light to every man” (John 1:9).

Now, the metaphor of light suggests something about the world around us—that it is living in darkness. That sounds a bit presumptuous to say. One might well ask, What about all the progress the world has made? You think of the “Dark Ages” as that time when civilization was primitive and unadvanced. But since the “enlightenment” four centuries ago, the world has grown up. Incredible advances in modern medicine and technology. Advances in the way we think about morality and social dynamics. And yet the clear claim of Scripture is that apart from Christ, for all its advances, the world remains in spiritual darkness. We talked about this a little bit last week—that there is a cloud covering this world, a veil keeping us in the darkness, blinding us to the world as it really is, where God reigns over it through his Son, Jesus, who is Savior to all who seek refuge in him, and judge to all who continue in rebellion (Ps. 2:10-12). There is a spiritual darkness that comes from what the Bible calls sin, disobedience to God.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 40.

Jesus came *as light* to chase away this darkness. Just before the Sermon on the Mount, when he begins his ministry in ch. 4, Matthew tells us that vision of Isaiah 9 was beginning to be fulfilled: “the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Matt. 4:16; cf. Isa. 9:2). Jesus came to deal with our sin—to live a life of faithfulness before his Father, in our place. To show us what life is supposed to look like before God, how the world is supposed to work in righteousness and holiness, in love and sacrifice and grace. He came to take our sin and rebellion on himself on the cross, that we might be forgiven, and through his resurrection, to give new life to those who take refuge in him as Savior and King.

The same king who says in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world,” tells his followers in Matthew 5[14-16], “You are the light of the world.” It is through his people that Jesus now shines his light. As our hearts are rescued and our lives are changed, as he conforms us more and more into his own likeness by the Spirit, our mission is to show the world what Jesus is like. As Jesus puts it, we are a “city on a hill that cannot be hidden.”

Growing up in Nebraska, we lived just north of town in the country. And at night, when you looked to the west, there was always a glow that hung on the horizon. I remember asking my dad when I was young what that was. He said, “That’s Grand Island.” Grand Island was 20 miles away. But when you’re in the country, and there’s nothing between you and that city, even in flat Nebraska, you can see the light. Put that city up on a hill, it shines all the brighter.

We are the light of the world, who show the world what Jesus is like. And so he tells us to let our light shine, so they see *his* light. And the way they see the light of Jesus in us, according to v. 16, is through our *good works*.

Sometimes we can talk so much of grace that we get uncomfortable talking about good works. Because we don’t want anyone to get confused and think, ‘That’s how you come to know God, by being good enough.’ We come to know God, we become members of God’s kingdom, not by being good enough (because we can’t), but by God’s grace through faith in Jesus our Savior and King. We are spiritually bankrupt; there’s nothing we could offer God to pay our debt of sin that would even touch the cost. Christ paid the debt in our place on the cross, and when we trust in him, we are forgiven that debt and become part of God’s family, members of his kingdom. We don’t just get a clean slate; the slate is broken, because Christ paid for every sin—past, present, future.

But as members of his kingdom, we are called to lives of good works. Lives of holiness and obedience. Lives that look like Jesus. Not in order to pay God back, but out of gratitude, love, and loyalty to the Father. And in faithfulness to our calling as his children. Good works are a good thing. In fact, the phrase “good works” is never used negatively in Scripture. The word “works” sometimes is, when people are depending on them to find their righteousness before God (e.g. Eph. 2:9). But “good works” are just that—they’re *good*. They’re the kind of words and actions that honor God and show others what he’s like. The kind that reflect the family portrait. And when the world sees this in us, when they see our lives changed by Christ and reflecting his character and love and beauty, it’s the light of Jesus, not us.

## A People Fit for the Mission

But what if that's *not* what they see? Or what if they can't see it because there's something in the way? There are three significant temptations we face as a people whose mission is to reach the world with the light of Christ.

The first temptation is to disengage from the world for fear of persecution. We just heard earlier a warning in vv. 11-12 that if you follow Christ, the world will persecute you. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11-12). We read that, and we often miss all the language of blessing and think, "I'm not so sure I want that. I don't like being insulted, or falsely accused." And so instead of letting our light shine, we go incognito with our Christianity. We try to fly under radar, lest anyone find out our true loyalties, and oppose or reject us, or otherwise try to harm us.

But that is to forfeit the mission God has given us. It defeats the whole purpose of light. People don't "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" (5:15). You don't turn the flashlight on when you're camping, but leave it in the backpack. You take it out. That's what it's for. To try to hide the family portrait in the closet when guests come over is to defeat the purpose of the family portrait.

Moreover, it's to miss out on blessing. It's to miss out on blessing. It's hard to think that being opposed or harmed can in anyway lead to blessing. And yet there is a reward in heaven, Jesus tells us, for sharing in his sufferings and being persecuted on earth.

Now it's important to remember that the blessing only comes when our persecution is "on account of Jesus." Martyn Lloyd-Jones reminds us, "It does not say, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are objectionable.' [Or] 'because they are being difficult.'"<sup>2</sup> A young high school student I once mentored used to find pride in being persecuted by his teachers. They were all against him because he was a Christian. Then I found out it was because he wasn't turning in his papers or assignments that they were against him. There's no blessing for that (cf. 1 Pet. 2:20).

But there is blessing in being persecuted for Christ. *And* good company—that's how the prophets of old were treated when they held fast to the truth. God honors his faithful people, and rewards their suffering. We will be vindicated in the end. So the apostle Peter reminds us, "But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. 'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.' But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet. 3:14-16).

The second temptation we face in our mission, rather than disengaging from the world, is to try to reach the world by becoming like the world. This is what Jesus warns against in v. 13: "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness [or taste], how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."

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<sup>2</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 130.

What does it mean that we are “the *salt* of the earth”? There are a number of uses that salt had in the ancient world—a preservative, fertilizer, seasoning, and so on. One commentator lists 11 different possibilities for what Jesus could be talking about here.<sup>3</sup> But I think he tells us what he’s talking about, because his concern is over the salt losing its “taste.” The NIV translates that “saltiness” here, but there’s a Greek word for saltiness and that’s not what Matthew uses. He used a word that means “to become tasteless or flavorless.”<sup>4</sup>

The church is to have a unique flavor in the world. And if it loses that flavor, it become useless for its mission. Have you ever made Ramen and forgot to add the little flavoring packet before you went to eat it? I almost did that this week (yes, your pastor still eats Ramen for lunch on occasion—don’t judge me). That packet is difference between lunch and garbage. Because it’s loaded with salt! And that salt is good—it gives it flavor.

The other way you can ruin Ramen is by adding too much water, so that the salt becomes diluted.<sup>5</sup> That’s, I think, the picture here. Similarly, the church loses its unique flavor—its unique contribution to the world—when it becomes diluted by the world.

One of the frequent charges against Christianity today is that it’s irrelevant. It’s outdated, it doesn’t connect with where people are really living. They don’t see why they need it. In fact, I know that some of us here are asking that very question; what does any of this have to do with my everyday life? That’s a legitimate question. And one of the reasons you’re asking it is that we don’t always do a good job listening to or understanding the stories and questions that shape the world, so as to be able to communicate the message of Christ in an understandable way.

I’ll come back to the question of what difference this makes in a little bit. But in light of those charges, there’s all sorts of pressure on the church today to become more “relevant,” more “attractive” to the lost. Sinclair Ferguson has put it more sharply, “At times we fall into the trap of being blackmailed by a world that says, ‘Unless I find your life attractive *on my own terms*, I will not respond to the message of the gospel.’”<sup>6</sup> And so we try to give them what they want, what will bring them in, so that we can try to sneak in what they really need according to the gospel. The problem is that *you win them to what you win them with*. You win them to what you win them with.

If in effort to win the world, we simply become like the world whether by feeding consumerism, or by adopting a coarseness of speech or a hollowed-out morality so that we can be less boring and more cool, then we’ve not won them to Jesus. We’ve won them to a baptized version of what they already have, which is as useless as Ramen without the salt. It’s garbage; it does them no good. If we give up the one unique thing we have to offer the world—the gospel of Jesus—in our attempt to win the world, we actually become irrelevant. We have lost our saltiness. And

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<sup>3</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (ICC, 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988-1997), 1:72-73.

<sup>4</sup> *μωραίνω*; see BDAG 663. Note that among modern English translations, NIV is the only one that uses “saltiness” instead of “taste” or “flavor” (cf. “savour,” KJV).

<sup>5</sup> This soup analogy was inspired by Doug O’Donnell, *The Gospel of Matthew* (PTW; Crossway, 2013; pre-published manuscript), 83-84.

<sup>6</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 61.

whatever else we're offering, you can probably find it in a support group, community center, or country club, and often times done a lot better.

I'm not saying we shouldn't be attractional; I'm saying we should be attracting them to Jesus, to the gospel of Jesus. The light we shine is not the light of financial security, or well-adjusted children, or successful careers, though the gospel speaks to all of those. Our light is not a new kind of Christianity that's not quite as boring or out of tune with what the world thinks. The light we shine is *Jesus*. Nothing more, nothing else than Jesus, and difference he makes in our lives.

Lloyd-Jones says, "The glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first. That is how revival comes."<sup>7</sup>

Yet there is a third temptation we can easily fall into, which is to hold onto certain secondary things so tightly that they actually block the light of the main thing, Jesus, whom we're trying to shine. Whenever any people seeks to live out the truth of the gospel, the Christian faith, they do so within a particular cultural context. For instance, here at Westgate we speak English. We meet in a relatively traditional New England church building, and have our worship services on Sunday mornings. We use particular instruments when we sing, and have a relatively regular order to our service. We have several different kinds of ministries as part of this church, some of which happen here in the building, others in our homes or local restaurants. None of those are bad things. But none of them are essential to the gospel of Jesus, either.

But when some of those secondary things become primary to us, when a church begins to hold tightly to certain cultural forms, but those forms happen to be obstacles to our mission rather than assets, we can begin to block the light of Jesus. Maybe it's because the way we do things is so foreign to our mission field that it doesn't connect, or so distracting that when they look at us, all they can see is that form, rather than Jesus. A pastor I met recently was sharing one of the questions he often encourages his congregation to consider: Are we willing to tolerate discomfort for the sake of growth? Are we willing to tolerate discomfort for the sake of growth—not merely numeric growth, but *gospel* growth—people coming to Christ? Are we willing to not always do things exactly the way we wish they were done, or to change the way we do certain things, in order to remove unnecessary obstacles and have a greater impact on those we're trying to reach for Christ?

And really, underneath that question is this: Do we really love the people we're trying to reach? Genuinely love them? Do we have a heart for the mission field God has placed us in, here in the MetroWest? A heart for our cities, our neighborhoods? Does it bug us that so many of them are facing a Christless eternity? Does that break our hearts? Or do we love doing things our way so much that we would rather keep the status quo, even if that means dimming or diffusing the light of Christ shining into the world? It's harsh to put it that way, but we have to ask it.

But when the gospel of Jesus gets a hold of our hearts, and we are being changed by the Spirit, such that our lives look increasingly like God's family, and our unique flavor remains; when that light shines without obstacle, people will see Jesus in us. When our hearts are so broken over our own sin, and we are so thankful and satisfied in Jesus who rescues us by his grace, such that

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<sup>7</sup> Lloyd-Jones, 37.

when others sin against us we don't respond in retaliation and vengeance but rather compassion and love, the world will see Jesus. When we see a brother or sister in need, and respond not by ignoring it, but by gladly laying down our lives, coming along side the single mom who's buried in bills and three jobs, or lending your car to someone who needs one, even at great personal expense, the world will see Jesus. "When we control our anger, lust, and lies, . . . When we trust in God to provide in trying economic times, . . . When we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and those in prison," "the world will taste the salt and see the light of the gospel" of Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

And when they see Jesus in us, the world has to respond. The world cannot remain indifferent before a church flavored by the gospel. If they are, then we have to ask whether we've lost our flavor, or are covering our light. But when they see Jesus in us, they will respond in one of two ways: persecution toward us, or praise toward God.

### **A Mission with Two Possible Results**

We've already talked about the reality of persecution. We've already seen in the Gospel of Matthew how Jesus' kingdom clashes with the kingdoms of this world. But whether it's as harmless as a snarky comment someone makes on Facebook (reviling is part of persecution), or more far-reaching in terms of marginalization or physical harm, because Jesus is king, and there is blessing in being persecuted for his sake, *we can rejoice*.

But of course that's not the response we want. We want, we long for people to meet and worship Jesus. We want the result Jesus talks about in v. 16: "that they may see your good deeds *and praise your Father in heaven*." We want people to see Jesus in our lives, to hear Jesus on our lips, to see that there is a solution for our sin and brokenness, there is a God whose love is stronger than our sin, and who has stepped into his own creation to bring us to himself. We want them to give glory to our Father in heaven by coming to him in faith and repentance and joy and finding the life and love that he alone can give—the life and love they were made for. We want people to bring glory to God by following Jesus.

And that's the point. It's all about Jesus. If you're here this morning, and you've been patiently sitting through this but thinking to yourself the whole time how arrogant these Christians must be. How full of themselves to think they have something the rest of the world doesn't have but desperately needs. Who do they think they are? Especially when what they offer seems so irrelevant? I want to you to know right now, it's not about us. It's not because we're somehow better, or more holy, or have it all together. We don't. It's not because of anything in and of ourselves; *it's because we've been changed by Jesus*. That's what we have to offer. That's *all* we have to offer—Jesus. And that's the most relevant thing in this world—to know the God who made you, to be reconciled to him, and to find the significance and purpose in life you've been looking for—to find grace and strength and wisdom for every situation, to live the way you were made to live, in loving relationship with God, as part of his new family, enjoying him forever, and serving him joyfully in this world by showing the world what God is like.

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<sup>8</sup> O'Donnell, 85.

## A People Focused on the Mission

So what does all this mean for Westgate, in our call to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ? Most of us have heard the statistics—Massachusetts is the fourth least-religious state in the nation. Evangelicals range somewhere just above 5 per cent.<sup>9</sup>

But you don't need statistics to tell you that. You have your neighbors. You have your friends. Your family and colleagues. You know the faces behind these statistics. You know the people they represent, a people still living in darkness and facing a Christless eternity. What does it mean for us to be salt and light today, in this time, in this place, for this people?

First it means *taking the gospel seriously for your own life and relationships*. If we do not find our identity and satisfaction in Jesus, if we are not living in the freedom of his grace rather than performing as though we have to keep him happy in order to be blessed; If we're not growing in holiness according to his Word, and learning to depend on him more and more each day; And if we're not speaking the gospel into each other's lives, helping each other recognize the sinfulness of sin and the sufficiency of God's grace as it relates to whatever it is we're facing; if the gospel of Jesus is not shaping us, then we have nothing to shine toward others.

Second it means *praying for the people*. Praying for the towns we live in, the companies we work for. If you don't have a heart for your neighborhood or community, ask God to give you one. And then ask him to give you individuals that you can be praying specifically for, before whom you can begin to let your light shine. We have to give ourselves to gospel-saturated prayer.

Third, it means *loving the people you're praying for*. Listen to their stories. Learn how they see life, the questions they ask. Be *with them* so that you can learn how to *love them*, so that you can share your life with them. And love them ultimately by bringing the gospel of Jesus to bear on their lives.

Fourth, it means *partnering together for mission*. The Beatitudes are a family picture, not an individual head shot. And so the world will see it more clearly when they see it lived out in community. A large part of that is simply being intentional about gospel ministry in life's normal rhythms, seeing all of life as a mission field, and the ordinary patterns of life as missional opportunities. That's why we're asking everyone to go through the *Living on Mission*<sup>10</sup> workbook this month, and to discuss it together. But an equally significant part of this is for us to share life together as a community that is engaged together in a common mission.

So often when Christians spend meaningful time together, we break off from the world and go do our own special thing. We call it "fellowship." But lest we forget what we learned in Philippians a year ago, biblical fellowship is sharing life both *in* the gospel and *for* the gospel—its advance. "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27, ESV).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Ed Stetzer, "New England: New Research and Analysis on America's Least Religious Region," March 21, 2013. Available at: <http://www.edstetzer.com/2013/03/new-england-new-research-data.html#more>.

<sup>10</sup> Coram Deo Church, *Living on Mission* (Gospel Resource Network, 2012).

At present we're exploring new ways that we can partner together as communities on mission, smaller communities that together let our light shine. You'll hear more about this in the weeks ahead, but on Saturday morning, April 27, we'll have Bland Mason, a church planter in Boston, here sharing with us what God's been doing in his church to advance the gospel through small community groups partnered together on mission. I hope everyone is able to attend that. It's very exciting to think about.

What might God do through us to shine his light, the light of Jesus, into the MetroWest, and to the world?