

The Futility of Hidden Light

In my last article, “Shining Lights in a World of Darkness” we saw how this passage on “salt and light” in Matthew 5:13-16 flows out of and builds on the “Beatitudes” which we’re introduced to in verses 3-12. Today I want to further our look at the section of the Christians calling to be light in the world by looking at:

—The Purpose of Light

Jesus uses the metaphor of the Christian as light which dispels darkness. This light allows us to see where we need to go, and also shines into the darkness of others in the world around us. Jesus teaches us that the purpose of this necessary light should deter us from attempting to function as a hidden light. “A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” The meaning of Jesus’ words to those in the first century would have been visually obvious. Scholars have noted that many cities in that day were built on a hill to protect them from danger. This strategic location allowed the residents to see enemies coming from a great distance. Likewise the city itself could not be hidden and would be seen by travelers for miles around. The gleam of the city—with buildings often built of white limestone—would have been radiant in the sunlight. At night, a similar effect would take place as the oil lamps from the houses in the city gave off a welcome glow that would have been a source of encouragement to weary travelers.

In contrast to this, we live in a day where few people ever experience a really dark night. Without realizing it, we’ve become accustomed to light everywhere. Even in rural areas there are often “night lights” on poles outside the houses. We can barely imagine the darkness of the first century without any light for miles around to guide a weary traveler except the light occasionally available from the night sky. As the traveler approached a “city set on a hill” the glow of the lights would be unmistakable. With this picture in our minds we can more clearly see why a Christian’s light must not be hidden. We want to be a warm and welcoming “light” to those weary travelers that God brings into our lives. This truth is further unpacked by Jesus’ next illustration.

When people light a lamp, it would make no sense whatsoever to place that lamp under a basket. This would be the height of futility or uselessness. Rather, a lighted lamp would be placed on a “lamp stand.” In this way the light shines into the darkness with the purpose of “giving light to all in the house.” The imagery is helpful. Rather than the household occupants groping around in the darkness with the very real potential of stumbling, falling and getting hurt, they can now see where they’re going. They can also see the beauty of the interior of the house itself. We can clearly see that this illustration militates against any Christian either blending in with or retreating from a dark culture. Jesus never intended for his people to gather in a “Christian ghetto” fenced in and trying to keep others out. We want, by grace, to live God-honoring lives and seek to actively engage the culture with gospel truth.

Sadly, rather than Christians seeking to reach out to those around us who need to hear the gospel, we can run the risk of avoiding people who are different than we are. We can be

uncomfortable in the presence of those who talk and act in ways that can be offensive to our Christian sensibilities. Because this is true, almost without realizing it, we can place expectations on non-believers which say—by our actions if not our words—“Clean up your act; try to look more like us and then we’ll accept you into our circle of friendships.” In contrast to this, Jesus reached out to those who were hurting and who needed his love, mercy and grace. In Matthew 11:28-29 Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”

Christians have been given a great blessing to be used of God as a “light” shining into the darkness. By seeking to reflect the beautiful light of Jesus Christ our Savior to those around us, many who are sad, sick and hurting may be blessed to come into the family of God. May God help us as we seek to graciously shine the light of Jesus Christ into a dark and hurting world. Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church PCA in Paxton, Illinois.