

“You are the Light of the World”

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

Last week we focussed on the statement, “You are the salt of the earth....” and what this means in our spiritual lives. Today we are looking at the verses that immediately follow them in Matthew, chapter 5: “You are the light of the world....”

It is significant that these two teachings occur together, and so among other things it will be useful for us to try to understand why. It will also be good to see how light – and especially “the light that is in you” – is discussed in other parts of the Lord’s Word.

But we begin with a critical truth: right from the beginning of the Gospel of John it is the Lord Himself who is called “the light of the world,” indeed as we heard in the readings He calls *Himself* that light, and He makes it clear that if we do not follow Him we walk through life in darkness. The book, True Christian Religion, speaks to this and makes the point that light as we know it is uncreatable, and flows in from a source that is actually infinite, that is, it has no beginning and no end (TCR 40, 472).

And this is interesting: “Divine Love,” we read, “forms life, as fire forms light. There are two properties in fire, burning and brilliance; from its burning proceeds heat, and from its brilliance light. Similarly there are two properties in love, one to which the burning of fire corresponds, and which in a certain way intimately affects the will of a person, and the other to which the brilliance of fire corresponds, and which similarly affects his understanding...” (TCR 39). So the light that is IN us flows in from the Divine Source that is outside of us, according to the Lord’s words in Matthew 6: -

“The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”

Of course “the body” in this passage cannot be the physical body, for how could that body be full of light? Rather the eye is a metaphor corresponding to the understanding part of the mind, and the body is also a metaphor corresponding to the will part that constitutes our whole inner nature. So, “you see,” our will is enlightened by our understanding of the truth so that we can live well.

It is similar to what was said last week: “You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt loses its flavour...” then what? To be called “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” is not only to be affirmed and valued, it is to be instructed and inspired with a sense of duty toward others: “Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”

But what kind of affirmation and what kind of duty are really meant here?

As noted last week, salt corresponds to a longing or desire for the conjunction of what is true with what is good, in other words, for the application of the truth to life. Salt attracts water – even so that we get thirsty when we eat salty food. So when we long for the truth of the Lord’s Word and seek to apply it to the good that we do, then we are “the salt of the earth” because we become the means, literally the catalysts for that conjunction and an inspiration to others.

But light corresponds to the truth itself, and the teaching that we are “the light of the world” reminds us of our obligation to share what we have learned with others so that they, too, may not only see the truth but more importantly see *by* the light of truth *how* to live. And of course we do not accomplish this by our telling people either how to think or what to do. Nor do we accomplish it by setting *ourselves* up as examples for others (though it may seem so from the Scripture passage); rather we let our light shine by humbly accepting what the Lord has taught us and living according to it, so that HIS light is reflected in us and shines through us.

“A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Most of us, even if we think we are right and others wrong, do not like to be set up as examples. We feel too exposed. We are inclined to worry that even though we *know* the truth we won’t be able to live up to it, explain it very well, or properly answer the challenges of those who think differently. To be honest, we are afraid. We don’t want to be accused of arrogance or pretentiousness, we don’t want to “mess up” in full view of our critics, we don’t want to have to defend our convictions, and we don’t want to look bad trying – not only because we might be embarrassed but also because we don’t want the truth itself to suffer through our personal failure. In short, we are very uncomfortable making a public statement or taking a public position, lest we suffer public scrutiny – and personal criticism.

Unfortunately, we really don’t have a choice in the matter. What we have is called responsibility – or if you like, opportunity.

To use an analogy, suppose you happen to discover the cure for a certain very common form of cancer. You can take this knowledge and lay low, or try to blend in with everyone else, but if you have a conscience at all you will make this information widely known – not because you are great, not because you know everything, not because you deserve any great credit for the discovery, not even because you can explain every detail of what you have; after all, you were probably just one of many who worked on this together, each doing his or her part. But now you have it, you know it works, and you know that people need it.

In a similar way any one of us might wake up one morning to realize that the Lord has actually called us and given us a really powerful new message of hope and understanding. And the great question of the day is not whether we are better than anyone else because of it, or whether we deserve anything more than anyone else, or even whether we can explain every detail of it; the question is simply whether we are willing to share this message – to let this light shine – or not.

“A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.” And the Holy City New Jerusalem is set on a hill, so again the question is, are we willing to live in that city, or will we just observe it and think about it from a long way off? Sure, we’re exposed (and vulnerable) up on the hill. But that’s just the point: the Lord said repeatedly that following Him would not be easy.

Remember, He who called Himself the light of the world said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain...” (John 15:16). Then, anticipating our doubts, He said, “Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops” (Matthew 10:27). There’s nothing like trying to teach something for helping you, yourself, understand it better. So in a way, it’s all about exposure; it’s all about standing up for something that this old, dark world desperately needs. And here’s the part many of us don’t understand: it’s not about wanting to be seen and admired; it’s not even so much about changing things in other people’s lives: it’s about the work that *the Lord* can do in and through us when we take a stand, when we are willing to be seen as members of a church that takes a stand, when we associate ourselves without reservation or fear with the doctrine that is called “a lamp” shining light on the literal sense of the Word, showing everyone the path of life.

Did you know that the church is represented in the book of Revelation as a lamp *stand*? In fact the seven churches of Asia Minor are described as *seven lamp stands*, each one upholding a particular truth of the Word, each one standing for something, and, yes, all but one *lacking* something that the Lord promises to provide if the members of that church will simply do their best. In the middle of the book of Revelation (ch. 11) we also read about two witnesses, who are described as two olive trees *and two lamp stands*, being given great power on earth, and these, we are taught, represent the two essentials of spiritual life, love (or charity) and faith. In the story these witnesses suffer persecution and are killed, but they are also raised up again after three and a half days. So we understand that everyone who accepts the truth will suffer persecution, but through that persecution we can be blessed and given great reward in heaven (Matt. 5:12).

“Behold,” Jesus said, “I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. And you will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the gentiles. *But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak but the spirit of your Father who speaks in you*” (Matthew 10:16-20).

Hundreds of passages of the Word and literally hundreds of *pages* of the heavenly doctrines speak to the subject of light. As for the technology of light, its power and its uses in the natural world so wonderfully illustrate the power of truth that illustrations might fill a hundred sermons. Just think: since ancient times light has been used as a medium of simple communication by means of coded signals from one hilltop to another.... Now it is used in fibre-optic telecommunication lines that span the globe. Even the physics of light illustrate the power and complexity of the truth it represents: is it made of particles or waves? It has the characteristics of both! And what about colours, from the rainbow to the paints, stains or pigments that surround us every day? Things only have colour because of the way light reacts to or reflects off their surfaces – and because of the way our eye perceives them.

Did you know, for example, that in a certain way all the colors of the rainbow are derived from red and white? It seems strange but it makes perfect sense symbolically, since red corresponds to love and white to wisdom, which are the two essentials of all human life. But of course there is science in it, too, since white isn’t really white, it’s CLEAR, representing clarity, and the clear

light we see – or rather by means of which we see – is a combination of all the colors, that is to say, a combination of all the different wavelengths in the electromagnetic spectrum. The color, red, is just the longest of all these visible light waves. This doesn’t exactly *explain* why you can see all the colors rising up from a spinning red and white disc, but it *suggests* an explanation as the reflection of light off the spinning disc shows up the other wavelengths.

In a different way a prism also shows up the colors of clear light by breaking it up into its component longer and shorter waves....

Again, the almost instantaneous transmission of data through a fiber-optic cable isn’t just a miracle of modern science, it’s a fabulous application of correspondences. How *does* the light bend with the twists and turns of the cable?! Well, it doesn’t! It’s actually reflecting off a mirror-like material that coats a transparent core, allowing the light to “bounce” in straight lines, obviously at the speed of light, until it travels the whole length of the cable. In a similar way the light of truth always shines directly from its Source, but it is reflected in a million ways as it impacts the knowledge and understanding we have in our minds.

So the Lord says,

“The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness.”

And yet He says, “You are the light of the world.” You have a job to do. You have an opportunity to serve a vital and essential use. You have an obligation not just to bask in the light of truth, not just to absorb its rays or to ponder them within yourself; – an object that does not reflect or transmit the light that shines on it is black. No, in giving you His Word and the beautiful teachings that show what it all means the Lord has challenged you – He has challenged all of us – to make a commitment, to make a statement, to come out of hiding, to go up the mountain, to live in the city that He has placed there so that all may see – not indeed ourselves but what we do; and not because we ourselves are good but because whatever good we do may help others to recognize and glorify Him.

Why do we hold back? Why do we resist this call? Perhaps we are too self-conscious. Perhaps we are uncertain, not having read much or thought very much about our faith. Perhaps we are too concerned about what others may think. But remember, we do not have to defend the truth. It speaks for itself! All we have to do is associate ourselves with it: – learn it, live it, and do our best to let its light shine through us. The Lord Himself will take care of everything else. He will see that we do not walk in darkness. And He will see that good comes of our efforts.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 5:10-16
Children’s talk on HOW we can be “the light of the world”

Selections from John on the Lord as “the light of the world,”
and from The Doctrine of the Word #104 & 106