

Matthew 5:14

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[0 : 00] Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are. Has anybody ever come up to you and posed that question to you?

John Stott, who recently passed away, well-known Anglican evangelical leader and prolific writer, reflecting on the occasion when Jesus challenges His disciples to so let their light shine that men would see their good deeds and praise their Father in heaven, says the following, How splendid it would be if non-Christians, curious to discover the secret or source of our light, were to come up to us and inquire, Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.

Or do we, in the words of Paul in his letter to the Christians in Philippi, shine like stars in the universe?

This evening I want to spend a little time considering this challenge laid before us by Jesus, the challenge that we read there in Matthew chapter 5.

You are the light of the world. Now, I was drawn to this passage as one that complements, helpfully, the declaration of Jesus on the occasion of the healing of the man born blind, that we've been thinking about these past couple of weeks.

[1 : 34] You remember how on that occasion Jesus declares the following, I am the light of the world. So on that occasion, that is the way He expresses things.

I am the light of the world. But here, He says to the disciples, You are the light of the world. Now, the sermon this evening we're going to develop really by looking at this declaration, You are the light of the world, and looking at it in the three parts that make it up.

First of all, the you, who is Jesus addressing, and the significance of that. But then also, and for a little longer, think about this description, You are the light.

What does it mean for Jesus to address, as we'll notice in a moment, His disciples, as the light, the light of the world? And then, very briefly, just notice the stage upon which we are to shine, which is the world.

You are the light of the world. So let's begin by thinking about who it is that Jesus addresses. Who are the you that He is speaking to there in verse 14?

[2 : 45] Matthew chapter 5 and verse 14. You are the light of the world. The you in the original is emphatic, and draws attention to those Jesus is addressing.

Well, who are they? Who is Jesus addressing? Well, as we backtrack to the beginning of the chapter, we're able to discover who He is addressing. There at the beginning of chapter 5, we read, Now, when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down.

His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them, saying... So He's withdrawn from the crowds, and He's surrounded by His disciples. Now, if that was the group of apostles, or a larger group, perhaps it's difficult to state categorically.

But the point is that He's addressing His disciples. He's addressing those who had taken that decision to follow Jesus. They are the ones that He addresses as the light of the world.

But to just reflect back on the comment I made a moment ago about the two occasions, two that we're thinking about, where Jesus uses this language, but on one He says, I am the light of the world, whereas here He says, you are the light of the world.

[4 : 06] How do we reconcile or marry these two clearly related but distinct statements of Jesus? I am the light of the world, but then here, you are the light of the world.

How can both be true? Well, if we just remind ourselves of the occasion in John's gospel where Jesus declares Himself, describes Himself as the light of the world, and remember the words that immediately precede Jesus' declaration.

For that, it would be helpful if we just quickly look to John chapter 9. So, we were thinking, or have been thinking about this chapter on two or three occasions now, but if we just remind ourselves there in John chapter 9 and in verse 4.

We read from verse 4 to verse 5, and what really I want you to notice is the words that immediately precede Jesus describing Himself as the light of the world.

If we read in verse 4, Jesus says, As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent Me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

[5 : 22] And it's these immediately preceding words. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. Now, the implication, I think, is very clear. Jesus is recognizing that He would not always be in the world in the manner that He was then.

And when He departed, the question that emerges is, well, would His light also depart with Him? You see, if He's saying, I'm the light of the world, but then He's implying that I'm not going to be here forever, so what happens when He goes?

What about the light? Well, what is clear, I think even in John's Gospel, even if we didn't have what Jesus says or recorded for us in Matthew's Gospel, what is clear is that the light of Jesus would continue to shine in and through His disciples?

And so it ought not to surprise us that on this other occasion, Jesus addresses His disciples and says to them, you are the light of the world. But how does that work?

How does it work that the light of the world that Jesus declares is Himself, how does it work that we, His disciples, would carry on shining that light?

[6 : 40] Is it a case that we make a really big effort to try and imitate Jesus, be like Jesus, and so in the measure that we manage that, so we can shine a little light, however flickering that light might be?

Well, imitation of Christ, worthy though that may be, will not do. What is required is union with Christ.

What is required is a relationship with Jesus that involves Jesus dwelling in us by His Spirit, that we might shine like Jesus shone when He was in the world.

In this vein, or in a similar vein, Paul speaks of the Christians, or speaks of Christians in his letter to the Ephesians as light in the Lord.

We won't look up the passage, but in the fifth chapter of that letter, that is the way Paul describes disciples, Christians, light in the Lord. Our light that we are to shine is the light of our Lord shining in and through us.

[7 : 52] The light is not our own. If we can illustrate, and all illustrations, of course, have their limitations, but if we think of ourselves as light bulbs, we know that a light bulb, independent of the source of power or light, is useless.

It serves no purpose. But when that light bulb is connected to a source of power, well, that bulb can shine brightly. As I say, it's not a perfect illustration, but maybe in a small way helps us to picture what is going on or what is required.

But before we move on to think about what Jesus is imagining or what He is conceiving when He speaks of the disciples as the light of the world, before we do that, I want us just to pause for a moment and appreciate how important this is that we are in this living and vital relationship with Jesus Christ if we are to shine in the way that Jesus anticipates.

You see, what Jesus is going to go on to say about the impact that He expects us to have as we shine in the world would be hopelessly utopian if He imagines that we will be able to do so by means of our own efforts at generating light.

But of course, Jesus does not intend us to shine in that way. He is addressing His disciples. He is addressing those who are connected to Him.

[9 : 33] And of course, in the light of a fuller understanding of what is involved in being a Christian, we can better understand how critical it is if we are to shine that we be united to Christ, that we be in fellowship with Christ, that as we are, so His light can shine in and through us.

Jesus knows that we will shine only in the measure that we are united to Him, our only and ultimate source of light. Hence, this emphatic you, you who are disciples, you who are united to Me, you are the light of the world.

But moving on to the next part of this statement of Jesus, you are the light of the world, the light. How does Jesus conceive that the disciples will shine like light?

Jesus is using picture language, but what does the picture point to? The use of light as a picture or symbol is common enough in the Bible.

It is a symbol of revelation, of revealing truth concerning God. Light is also a picture of life. Light is, as we know, life-giving.

[10:54] But what about on this occasion in Matthew chapter 5? Well, we could apply the illustration in different ways. You could easily have a sermon and say, well, Jesus says that we're the light of the world.

Well, let's think of all the different ways that light is useful. And even if we limited ourselves to the way the picture of light is used in the Bible, we could no doubt have a three or a five or a ten-point sermon and in all of these ways sort of develop the picture of being light.

Well, we could do that, but I think we would do well to limit ourselves to what Jesus Himself declares concerning what He intends by speaking of His disciples as light, because He goes on to tell us what He has in mind when He describes us as the light of the world.

And what Jesus has in mind, certainly we could say specifically, if not exclusively, becomes clear in verse 16. Then in Matthew chapter 5 and in verse 16, what does Jesus say there?

As He develops the thought, develops this truth that His disciples are the light of the world. Well, then in verse 16 we read, in the same way, let your light shine before men.

[12:14] Okay, but what is this light? That they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. There Jesus identifies the light that is to shine with our good deeds.

Or we can certainly say that the picture that is being painted is that our light issues in or is made visible in good deeds. So Jesus Himself very clearly identifies what He has in mind by describing His disciples as the light of the world.

If they were to say, well, what does that mean? What does that look like? Well, this is what it looks like. You will shine as you do good deeds. But what are these good deeds that we are to do as disciples of Jesus?

We can understand this language of good deeds broadly as everything a Christian says and does because he is a Christian.

Every outward and visible manifestation of our Christian faith. That would be a broad way of understanding it and I think legitimate. But having recognized that there is that broad way of understanding this term, good deeds, it does seem to me that the primary meaning of good deeds must be practical, visible deeds of kindness and compassion that embody the good news of God's love that we proclaim.

[13:50] Now, these good deeds, these deeds of kindness and compassion, they will certainly open doors of opportunity to speak of Jesus.

As we are engaged in these good deeds, that will, as I say, give us the opportunity to speak of Jesus and to share the good news. In addition, these good deeds will give credibility and authority to our spoken word.

But the good deeds themselves are, it seems to me, in the first instance, actions rather than just words. Now, you can't divorce these two things, of course, because actions go accompanied by words.

But if we had to emphasize the primary notion that Jesus has, as it would appear, it is this stress on disciples shining, shining the light of Jesus by this particular means of the good deeds that they perform.

Now, at that point, there's probably merit in pausing for a moment and asking, how can we, as disciples of Jesus, examine ourselves in this matter?

[15:06] How about this little experiment for you to try? At the close of the day, why not do it tomorrow? Tomorrow evening, I don't know what the close of the day is for you, if it's nine o'clock or ten o'clock or two in the morning, well, you can choose your time.

But at some point towards the end of the day, just pause for a moment and ask yourself this question. What did I do today because I am a Christian?

Because I am a Christian. You may do good things tomorrow, but I want you to ask yourself the question, what did I do today because I'm a Christian? See, this is what Jesus has in mind.

He has in mind behavior. He has in mind conduct. He has in mind the performance of good deeds that emanate from, that issue from those who are His disciples very particularly.

So there's a wee task for you to perform. But we need to explore a little further and think about what Jesus anticipates will be the result of these good deeds because Jesus tells us what He expects will be the outcome of His disciples shining in this way.

[16:19] Then in verse 16, in the same way, let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. That they is a reference to men, which I think we can reasonably take to be those who are not disciples, unbelievers who are looking on.

I suppose you could extend it to all, but I think what Jesus has particularly in mind are those who are not His disciples and who are looking on at the disciples of Jesus, the manner in which they live, the good deeds that they perform.

And what Jesus says is that this is the way it works, He says. Your light will shine and it will shine in the doing of good deeds. Others will look on, they'll see your good deeds, and as a result, they will praise your Father in heaven.

Well, it's clear enough what Jesus is anticipating. The problem that I have, certainly as I think of my own life, the problem I have with this isn't the clarity of it, it's very clear.

The problem I have is, does this actually happen? And I would invite you to ask that question of your own life. As you shine for Jesus, as you are engaged in the doing of good deeds, does this happen?

[17:38] Do others who are unbelievers see and do they as a result praise your Father in heaven? This is what Jesus says will happen. So it's not unreasonable for us to ask, well, is it happening?

And so, I certainly ask that question of myself. Maybe to make it a little bit more specific, maybe a little bit more uncomfortable for us, can I ask you this?

Can you think of somebody? I don't want you to think of 100 people, 50 people, or 10 people. Can you think of one person? A real life person, somebody with a name, somebody you can picture in your mind's eye, a real person.

Can you think of one person who was not a Christian, who saw your good deeds and as a result praised your Father in heaven? Now, maybe you can, and that's great, but that's the challenge I'm laying out for you to consider.

Now, let's be clear. Jesus is not saying, He is most definitely not saying, that every unbeliever who sees your good deeds will respond in this way.

[18:53] He's not saying that. But what is clear is that He does anticipate that some will when we shine as He would have us shine.

Now, if that's not happening, in the measure that Jesus seems to anticipate, what might be the reason for that? Now, I'm not presuming to know if it is or if it isn't happening in your own Christian walk, but if it's not happening, why might that be?

I think maybe we need to reflect on two related possibilities as to why it might be that what Jesus anticipates happening often doesn't happen.

Firstly, might it not be that the problem is that we are not among men, and so men don't see us?

Now, you might say, well, that's a silly thing to say.

Of course we're among men. But really what I'm asking is, are we so engaged engaged with those who are not believers? Are we so involved in the society, in the community, in the neighborhood where God has placed us that we are visible?

[20:04] That people know, well, there is a Christian, and I know they're Christians, and I know that they're doing what they're doing because they're our Christians. Are we visible? Are we seen by men?

It's not that we go out of our way to be seen. It's not that we're exhibitionists and we say, hey, look at me. But do the lives that we live, are they lives that are visible to others?

Or is it the case that we are too hidden? Do we, to pick up on what Jesus is saying here in the previous verse, do we hide our light under a bowl? Jesus is saying, don't do that.

But the question is, well, maybe that is what we're doing, and that's the problem. I think it is the case individually, but also corporately as the church.

Let's think of our own congregation. I think it is often the case that we are invisible in this light or on this subject. Listen to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer says concerning this matter.

[21:09] And I quote, flight into the invisible is a denial of the call. A community of Jesus which seeks to hide itself has ceased to follow Him.

Or to express the same idea using a wee phrase that you will be familiar with. We really need to get out more. That's maybe a bit more understandable than Bonhoeffer, who no doubt there's a lot more weight to what he says.

We need to get out more. That we would be seen. That others would see our good deeds, and as they see our good deeds, so they would praise our Father in heaven.

So maybe that's the first thing we need to ponder on as to maybe explaining why it is. If indeed you accept my premise that what Jesus anticipates often doesn't happen, and we say, well, why doesn't it happen?

It's not that Jesus gets it wrong. It's obviously the fault doesn't lie with Him in what He anticipates. The fault must lie with us. So that's one thing to consider as we ponder on this.

[22 : 13] But the second thing that we can consider, and they are related, is I wonder if we need to think about what I'm calling, and maybe there would be a better way of putting this, but what I'm calling the quality of the good deeds that are required.

And what I mean by this is that the outcome Jesus predicts of others looking on and as a result praising our Father in heaven, the outcome that Jesus predicts will be seen as a function of how good our good deeds are.

We are to be extraordinarily good. We are to be radically good. We are to be eye-catchingly kind. And I stress, not that we go out with the intention that folk would see us in that way and celebrate it, but that is what we are to be.

We are to be sacrificially compassionate. Let me illustrate what I'm trying to say with an example from just yesterday.

Yesterday, as I went into cults to buy some stuff at the Tesco Express, there was a big issue salesman at the door of the supermarket.

[23 : 24] And I did what, I have to confess, I very seldom do. I said, oh, I'll buy a copy of the big issue. So I bought a copy of the big issue. You might say, or I might say, well, I did my good deed for the day.

I bought a copy of the big issue to help this guy who's obviously got difficulties and is responding to them by selling the good, the big issue.

But the question I ask myself, and I can ask you, and I think it's a fairly easy one to answer, is as a result of that good deed, let's call it a good deed. Is anybody praising my Father in Heaven?

Well, it's not very likely. I'd be very surprised if anybody is praising my Father in Heaven as a result of me buying the big issue. A bunch of other folk who aren't Christians also bought the big issue from this particular gentleman.

What I'm saying is, it's simply not enough. To use the language that kind of sticks in the throat for us as evangelical Christians, it's not good enough. That good deed, it's just not good enough.

[24 : 30] Now, what if, and I didn't do this, but what if I tried to befriend the big issue salesman and get some kind of handle on what are his struggles and needs, and what if I were to try and help him in practical and costly ways in the event that he were open to that approach?

What if I were to do that? What if I were to spend myself in a very difficult, sacrificial way, a costly way in terms of time and money and emotional stress?

What if I were to do that? If I were to do that, might it be more likely that there would be those, maybe the man himself, maybe others looking on, who would praise my Father in heaven?

I pose the question just to illustrate what I'm thinking about and sharing with you. Now, I've already kind of hinted at this maybe concern that there could be when I speak of good works and of our good works having to be really good.

Am I peddling some kind of work salvation? Well, not at all. All that I'm doing is simply reflecting on what Jesus says and trying to understand why what he anticipates happening seldom happens.

[25 : 51] Why is that? And I'm pondering with you as to why that might be. But if we do fall short often, as I think we do, why is that?

Why do we shine so opaquely? Why do our good deeds seldom remain in praising our Father in heaven? And I wonder, does this not take us back to where we began and our permanent and urgent need to be ever more connected to Jesus, the source of our light?

You see, the closer we are to Jesus, the deeper our relationship with Jesus, the greater our appreciation of his love for us.

in that measure, our light will shine. In that measure, our good deeds will be of a quality that will result in man looking on and some of them praising our Father in heaven.

You are the light of the world. Just very fleetingly, the phrase ends by speaking of our stage, if you wish. You are the light of the world.

[27 : 08] Where are we to shine? Well, we have a big stage to shine on, the whole wide world. And it is a good job that we share this mission with all Christians in other churches and denominations and indeed with Christians in other countries, like as we're thinking about this evening, especially in Pakistan.

We share this task that God has given to the disciples of being the light of the world with all Christians all over the world. But as we draw things to a close, I just want to finish with two closing thoughts.

The first closing thought is concerned with what we could call the urgency of the challenge. And urgent in one particular sense. The particular sense in which I'm describing this challenge as urgent is that we and we alone as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, can bring light to the world.

Jesus says, you are the light of the world. He doesn't say you are a light in the world. He says, you are the light of the world. And so it's urgent in that sense that if we don't shine, then the world will remain in darkness.

Nobody is going to do it for us. Nobody is going to shine for us. We and we alone, as disciples of Jesus, have this possibility, this opportunity, this capacity to shine the light of Jesus Christ.

[28 : 35] So in that sense, it's urgent that we do shine because if we don't, then the world remains in darkness. But the second closing thought concerns what I'm calling the opportunity on our doorstep.

You know, sometimes we lament that we live in dark times. I'm sure you've heard folk express themselves in that way and in many ways it's a legitimate lament.

We do live in dark days. We do live in dark times that would seem to be getting darker as the weeks pass. Now, my question is this. Should that reality, if we accept that that's true, that we live in dark times, should such a reality leave us downcast or should such a reality rather produce in us excitement and expectation?

And what I would suggest to you is that rather than being downcast, we should be excited. And why? Because the darker the world, the brighter we can shine.

The darker the world, the brighter the light shines. We know that's the way it is. And so, these dark times that we recognize should not be a reason for us to be depressed and downcast, but rather to grasp this growing opportunity to shine as stars in the universe, to use the language that we commented on earlier.

[30 : 05] And so, I close what I began. Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are. Wouldn't it be exciting if somebody did ask you that or something to that effect?

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. And women of life of life and of life of life of life of life of life and of life of life and of life and of life and of life and Sons