

“Selected Gospel Sections”

Spring Series 1

Lesson 3

“The Light of the World”

Matthew 5:14-16; Mark 4:21-23; Luke 8:6-18; 11:33-36; John 8:12.

Objective: To understand the message of the Gospel accounts in their context within each work independently and then to compare the accounts to each other to seek understanding of emphasis and focus. The goal is then to apply this message to our time and context in order to understand the message’s call on our lives.

Materials: To use the Greek, Syriac, and other ancient translations in order to help us understand the message of these Gospels. We will also examine the writings about these passages in journal articles, commentaries and other sources.

Procedures

1. To first translate each text from Greek and then compare it to other ancient translations
2. To identify issues of importance within the texts and to explore possible meanings as they applied to the original audience.
3. To take the meaning for the original audience of the Gospels and to understand it how applies to our modern context and cultural situation.
4. To explore ways that these text call the disciples of Jesus to live their lives as faithful followers.

Matthew 5:14-16: ¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city being built upon a mountain cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a grain basket, but upon the lampstand, and it shines to all the house. ¹⁶ In this way let your light shine before men, in order that they might see your good works and give glory to your Father in the heavens.”

Mark 4:21-23: ²¹ “And he said to them, “Is a lamp brought to be put under a grain basket, or under the bed? Not to be put upon the lampstand? ²² For there is nothing hidden, which will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret which will not come to be known. ²³ If anyone has ears to hear let him hear.”

Luke 8:16-18: ¹⁶ “No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a vessel, or puts it under a bed, but puts it upon a lampstand, in order that those entering may see the light. ¹⁷ For nothing is hidden which will not be revealed, nor is anything secret which will not become known and come to be known. ¹⁸ Then take heed how you listen; for those who have, shall be given and to the one who does not have, also what he supposes he has will taken from him.”

Luke 11:33-36: ³³ “No one after lighting a lamp puts it in a hidden place [neither under the grain basket], but upon the lampstand, so that the ones entering may see the light. ³⁴ Your eye is the lamp of your body.

John 8:12: ¹² Again Jesus spoke to them saying, “I am the light of the world. The one following me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Whenever your eye is healthy, also your whole body is full of light; when evil it is, also your body is full of darkness. ³⁵ Therefore watch closely the light in you lest it is darkness. ³⁶ If then your whole body is full of light, having no part in darkness, it will be full of light as when a lamp gives light with its rays.”



The words of Jesus have through the centuries inspired countless millions of people, but they have also confused, confounded, and dumbfounded, countless millions more. The words of Jesus are not easy to understand and they challenge us to grapple with them and they too grapple with our souls. No other words in Holy Scriptures have the power to draw people together and divide them as powerfully as do the words of Jesus. I have been to a number of funerals where they talk about the words written in red. The words in red seem to mean different things to different people. For some the color red means to be cautious, or even to stop reading, because there is danger in these words. There is in fact danger that hearts will be transformed, lives will be changed, and priorities upended. For others the words of Jesus, in red, come as words of love and compassion, challenging one to live a life of greater compassion and self-sacrifice following the example of Jesus, but as welcome words for a seeker. For others the words in red seem to provide comfort as in a warm coat, or thick blanket combatting the cold reality of a harsh and unforgiving world, but in each instance these words call for transformation, for making decisions about priorities, goals, value judgments, and how we will direct our lives.

Whatever the words of Jesus signal to you at the outset you can be sure that these words will upset the status quo and change things in your very core. You see, even people who do not believe in Jesus nor in the



mission that He undertakes recognize that the world in which we live is flawed and that it damages those who live in it, and that injustice is rampant. The world appears to inflict harm indiscriminately in spite of guilt, or innocence, good, or bad. Our inbuilt sense of justice tells us that such a circumstance is not correct, and not the way things should be. Hardship, pain, injustice, and death jangle our nerves and cause us to shudder in disbelief and horror, especially when bad things happen to good people. In some sense, I suppose it depends upon how we define “good.” For some that is a term that is used as a measure of the relative difference between someone who sets out to do harm as opposed to someone who at least attempts to do no harm in the world, or to anyone.

When it comes to the words of Jesus He defines these things in more concrete recognizable terms that challenge us to consider what He means. In Matthew 5:14-16 Jesus talks about His disciples being the “... the light of the world.” Simple words, but what do they mean for one who follows Jesus? The meaning is far from simple. The author of this universe is far from simple and His words certainly are not simple and shallow. In Matthew 5 the “light” and “good works” are integrally connected. Jesus indicates that when people see the good works done by the disciples their impulse will be to “give glory to your Father in the heavens.” The indication, in this context, would seem to indicate that for those observing the light there is an understanding

that the source of the light here is not from the individual, but from God; as it is He that those seeing the light give glory.

Chun in her “Presidential Address,” delivered at the turn of the millennium spoke of the fact that, “Mission is living the gospel teaching. Teaching the knowledge of God revealed in Christ, in his incarnation, public life, redemptive death and resurrection should be in harmony with actual living. Words and acts are to be in unity.” She goes on to say that, “Without unity of words and acts there can be no trust.”¹ If you look around our world today not many people in the West are looking to religion to bring light into their lives. People turn today to the government, the legal system, and to places of education for answers to the problems that confront them. Thompson points out that, We are building a society on the assumption that, “truth” and “light” values are set by the eyes of the beholder. It is the perception of many, if not most in our society, that if there is any light to be shone in this world it will be shone by expert witnesses in the various fields. It is not a world which takes the claims of the church very seriously.²

¹ Chae Ok Chun, “Presidential Address: Mission in a New Millennium, *Mission Studies*, 17:1-2 (2000), pp. 43-58.

² James w. Thompson, “The Light of the World,” *Restoration Quarterly* 32:4 (1990), pp. 227-230.

Many times this situation has come into being because the world has understood that though the church proclaims the words of Jesus they do not live them. This dichotomy of words and deeds have opened the church up to the charge of being nothing more than an actor (a hypocrite) reciting the words of a play that do not in reality reflect heartfelt belief. Olley argues, in his wonderfully written article, that there is "... a close link between "light," "city," "righteousness," (and *torah* "instruction"), the coming of the kingdom and "the nations" sharing in blessing. Hence the behavior of the community is of key significance for the mission of God's people: the ethics described in the sermon on the mount has missiological motivation."³ It interests me the phone calls that we receive in the church office and the people that come to the door. Most come wanting something in the way of help paying utilities, rent, for medication, food, transportation, death certificates, burial expenses, gas, clothing, etc. Many of these things are seen today as essentials of life such as electricity, gas, and medication. Some would see these even as human rights. However, I think I can count on one hand the number of people that have come to the church asking for a Bible, for prayer (that was not using an angle to ask for something else), to seek help for spiritual insight, how to find wisdom for living a godly life, or something other than the material things in life.

³ John W. Olley, "You are Light of the World': A Missiological Focus for the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew," *Mission Studies* 20:1 (2003), pp. 1-38.

Some see the church as their own private Genie, from which they can request anything that their heart desires and if the people refuse then they are clearly not, in the eyes of those seeking help, really people that live out the words of the Gospel, (at least that is what many have said). The terrible thing for me is that sometimes I start to wonder if they are correct. Am I hard-hearted because I will not give the person standing on the street corner a few dollars so that they can buy something to eat, or drink? Is that what Jesus is talking about in these verses? You see it is not really as important what the world thinks of us as it is what we think of ourselves. When we begin to doubt ourselves then we are effected by what others expect of us and if those expectations are wrong then any changes that we make to meet those expectations will be wrong and instead of being light we become a part of the darkness.

Let us examine a little more deeply the words of Jesus in the Gospel accounts and determine if we can understand the intent of Jesus more fully in delivering them. In 1949, Gerhard von Rad published an article suggesting that the “city on a hill” refers to Jerusalem in Matthew’s Gospel. He was likely the first modern

author to make this suggestion, which was based upon connecting the words of Jesus with Isaiah 2:1-4⁴;

60:1-21⁵).⁶ This understanding has been adopted by a number of modern commentators with a great many

concluding that von Rad was indeed correct. It is most likely the case that a contemporary hearer (one

⁴ This is what Isaiah, Amoz's son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the days to come the mountain of the LORD's house will be the highest of the mountains. It will be lifted above the hills; peoples will stream to it.

³ Many nations will go and say, "Come, let's go up to the LORD's mountain, to the house of Jacob's God so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in God's paths." Instruction will come from Zion; the LORD's word from Jerusalem.

⁴ God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war. CEB.

⁵ Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the LORD's glory has shone upon you. ² Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the LORD will shine upon you; God's glory will appear over you. ³ Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance. 60:4 Lift up your eyes and look all around: they are all gathered; they have come to you. Your sons will come from far away, and your daughters on caregivers' hips. ⁵ Then you will see and be radiant; your heart will tremble and open wide, because the sea's abundance will be turned over to you; the nations' wealth will come to you. ⁶ Countless camels will cover your land, young camels from Midian and Ephah. They will all come from Sheba, carrying gold and incense, proclaiming the LORD's praises. ⁷ All Kedar's sheep will be gathered for you; rams from Nebaioth will be your offerings; they will be accepted on my altar, and I will glorify my splendid house. 60:8 Who are these who fly like a cloud, like doves to their shelters? ⁹ I'm the hope of the coastlands. Ships from Tarshish are in the lead to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them for the name of the LORD your God and for the holy one of Israel, who has glorified you. ¹⁰ Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you. Though in my rage I struck you down, in my favor I have consoled you. ¹¹ Your gates will be open continually; day and night they won't close, to bring to you the wealth of nations, and their kings led in procession. ¹² The nation and the dynasty that won't serve you will perish; such nations will be devastated. ¹³ Lebanon's glory will come upon you, cypress, elm, and pine, to glorify the site of my sanctuary, and I will honor my royal footstool. ¹⁴ The children of your tormenters will come bending low to you; all who despised you will bow down at your feet. They will call you The LORD's City, Zion, of the holy one of Israel. ¹⁵ Instead of being abandoned, hated, and forbidden, I will make you majestic forever, a joy for all generations. ¹⁶ You will suck the milk of nations, and nurse at royal breasts. You will know that I am the LORD, your savior and your redeemer, the mighty one of Jacob. ¹⁷ Instead of bronze I will bring gold; instead of iron I will bring silver; instead of wood, bronze; and instead of stones, iron. I will make peace your governor and righteousness your taskmaster. ¹⁸ Violence will no longer resound throughout your land, nor devastation or destruction within your borders. You will call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise. ¹⁹ The sun will no longer be your light by day, nor will the moon shine for illumination by night. The LORD will be your everlasting light; your God will be your glory. ²⁰ Your sun will no longer set; your moon will no longer wane. The LORD will be an everlasting light for you, and your days of mourning will be ended. ²¹ Your people will all be righteous; they will possess the land forever. They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands, to glorify myself. CEB.

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, "The City on the Hill," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), pp. 232-242.

hearing the words of Jesus from the mouth of Jesus Himself) would have immediately thought of “Jerusalem” as the city on a hill *par excellence* (compare with Revelation 21, especially verse 24⁷). In Isaiah 1:21-26⁸ the people of Jerusalem are to be transformed (described as Jerusalem) in order to become a community that is what God intended: “a city of righteousness” (i.e. a city where all the people, but especially the leaders, do what is right, just, and where there is a peaceful harmony).⁹

Nations will then be drawn to Jerusalem because of the way the people behave. They behave in a manner that reflects the teachings of God, promoting justice, taking care of the widows and orphans, and living in harmony with one another. In Isaiah 2:5¹⁰, the people are described as walking in the “Lord’s light.” In this context, and in the context of Isaiah 60, “light” is associated with the people being “righteous.”¹¹ In the

⁷ **The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.** CEB.

⁸ **1:21 This faithful town has become a prostitute! She was full of justice; righteousness lived in her—but now murderers. ²² Your silver has become impure; your beer is diluted with water. ²³ Your princes are rebels, companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and pursues gifts. They don’t defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause never reaches them. ²⁴ Therefore, says the LORD God of heavenly forces, the mighty one of Israel: Doom! I will vent my anger against my foes; I will take it out on my enemies, ²⁵ and I will turn my hand against you. I will refine your impurities as with lye, and remove all your cinders. ²⁶ Then I will restore your judges as in earlier times, and your counselors as at the beginning. After this you will be called Righteous City, Faithful Town.** CEB.

⁹ John W. Olley, “You are Light of the World’: A Missiological Focus for the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew,” *Mission Studies* 20:1 (2003), pp. 1-38.

¹⁰ **Come, house of Jacob, let’s walk by the LORD’s light.** CEB.

¹¹ cf. 60:21; 61:3, 8, 10-11.

context of Isaiah, the contrast between “light” and “dark” covers the entire life of the community. Darkness carries the meanings of defeat, devastation, injury, and captivity as the result of war, and oppressive social settings where the norm is injustice and disorder rather than justice, peace, and order. The Jewish people came to understand that there could be no lasting prosperity for them without the people behaving in the right way before God.¹² Israel was not chosen by God just so that their nation, their people, would be blessed. God had bigger plans, and His plans were that through Israel and their righteous behavior, their right living before God, they could become a beacon of justice for all people.¹³ This wider mission of Israel, to bless the nations through their correct behavior, is also seen in the Torah itself.¹⁴

¹² John W. Olley, “‘You are Light of the World’: A Missiological Focus for the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew,” *Mission Studies* 20:1 (2003), pp. 1-38.

¹³ Isaiah 42:6 **I, the LORD, have called you for a good reason. I will grasp your hand and guard you, and give you as a covenant to the people,** CEB. Isaiah 49:6 **He said: It is not enough, since you are my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the survivors of Israel. Hence, I will also appoint you as light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.** CEB.

¹⁴ Genesis 18:18-19 **Abraham will certainly become a great populous nation, and all the earth’s nations will be blessed because of him. ¹⁹ I have formed a relationship with him so that he will oversee his children and his household after him. And they will keep to the LORD’s path, being moral and just so that the LORD can do for Abraham everything he said he would.** CEB. Deuteronomy 4:5-8 ⁵ **So pay attention! I am teaching all of you the regulations and the case laws exactly as the LORD my God commanded me. You must do these in the land you are entering to possess. ⁶ Keep them faithfully because that will show your wisdom and insight to the nations who will hear about all these regulations. They will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and insightful people!” ⁷ After all, is there any great nation that has gods as close to it as the LORD our God is close to us whenever we call to him? ⁸ Or does any great nation have regulations and case laws as righteous as all this Instruction that I am setting before you today?** CEB.

This theme of light became associated with, Jerusalem, the people of Israel, and their correct behavior acting as a beacon, leading people to God, in other writings of the Jews in the centuries leading up to the time of Christ.¹⁵ The statement in 1 Enoch is similar to one in Daniel 12:3.¹⁶ “Light” is associated with the enjoyment of freedom, prosperity, and with a harmonious society. In the context of the sermon on the mount there is also a connection between the bearing of affliction, and the suffering of persecution that is brought about because of obedience to God. In both Isaiah 49 and Matthew there is a connection made between being the “light” and “persecution” for following God.¹⁷ The theme of being a “light” to the Gentiles is also found in Acts 13:47 where Isaiah 49:6 is quoted.¹⁸ The mission of God, that was originally the calling of God, for the Jewish nation would pass to the church because of their (the Jewish nation’s) continued failure to take up that

¹⁵ Tobit 13:10-11 **Acknowledge the Lord in goodness, and praise the Lord of ages! Then your dwelling will be rebuilt for you with joy. He will bring joy to all the captives among you, and he will love for all eternity all those who have been subjugated.** ¹¹ **A bright light will shine forth into the farthest corners of the earth. Many nations will come to you from afar, and inhabitants from all the ends of the earth will come to your holy name. They will bear gifts in their hands for the king of heaven. Generation after generation will give joyful worship to you and honor your name forever and always.** CEB. Likely composed between 225 and 175 B.C. 1 Enoch 104:2 **Be hopeful, because formerly you have pined away through evil and toil. But now you shall shine like the lights of heaven, and you shall be seen; and the windows of heaven shall be opened for you. Your cry shall be heard.** Charlesworth. The complete work was composed between 300 B.C. and 100 B.C.

¹⁶ Daniel 12:3 **Those skilled in wisdom will shine like the sky. Those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever and always.** CEB.

¹⁷ John W. Olley, “‘You are Light of the World’: A Missiological Focus for the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew,” *Mission Studies* 20:1 (2003), pp. 1-38.

¹⁸ **This is what the Lord commanded us: I have made you a light for the Gentiles, so that you could bring salvation to the end of the earth.** CEB.



mission, in an effective manner. This should be a stark reminder and challenge to the church that they too exist for a purpose and that purpose is not for the salvation of the individual, but for bringing the message of salvation to all the nations, to all people.

One of the things that needs to be noted about this mission too is that it is a corporate mission that is set for the community of believers, not an individual enterprise. This point is especially to be emphasized due to the Old Testament contextual background, but also due to Matthew 5:14 which emphatically uses the “you” plural pronoun to describe those who are the “light of the world.” It is only together that the followers of Jesus would function as “light.”¹⁹ The light metaphor presents the figure of the disciples of Jesus as illumination for the world. “Matthew believes that empirical Israel has failed to carry out this mission of the people of God and that the church made up of Jews and Gentiles is now charged with this sacred task (28:18-20).”²⁰ The church is now to take up the mission of God in order to fulfill the mission, which is to be a light to all the nations.

¹⁹ John W. Olley, “‘You are Light of the World’: A Missiological Focus for the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew,” *Mission Studies* 20:1 (2003), pp. 1-38.

²⁰ Eugene M. Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 87-505.



The main thrust of the polemic is not to bring an indictment against the Jews, but to serve as a warning to the disciples of Jesus (the church) not to fail in their mission. The salt and light metaphors are meant to indicate that being salty is not an option for salt and shining is not an option for light. The Matthean words of Jesus strike the “death blow to all religion that is purely personal and private.”²¹ The call to be light is the call to be community, the community of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Life that is lived as authentic followers of Jesus Christ delivers a message that cannot be concealed. It is of note that when Christians live lives that fulfill the calling of Jesus the result is that the name of God is glorified (Matthew 5:16).

In this lesson we have mostly concentrated on the message of Matthew’s Gospel because it is so rich, full and desperately needs to be heard in our time. Certainly the focus of Matthew is to call His disciples to mission. The emphasis in Mark’s Gospel is to recognize that judgement will indeed come with an eye to challenging people to turn and repent and to come and to follow Jesus. The same focus seems to be central in Luke while John’s Gospel seeks to offer hope for those that had none. The light that Jesus brings promises hope to those that understood that they could never be good enough to merit salvation on their own.

²¹ Eugene M. Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 87-505.



The words of Jesus continue to call people to join Him in His mission, to fulfill the calling of a God who will not give up and who relentlessly pursues those who are lost. Jesus calls His followers to join with Him in this same mission in order to continue the process of transforming this world into the paradise of God, a just and merciful world, where people live in harmony and respect with one another. That transformation begins in the heart of each individual, but to truly be a part of the calling of Jesus those individuals must join together as the united body of Jesus Christ, as the community of believers, to walk with God and with others in order to be a part of the plan of God to redeem a broken and unjust world.

Synopsis

The words of Jesus are challenging words that are complex and difficult for us to understand. They call us to listen intently, to ponder deeply, and to trust. For some, the words of Jesus bring life and hope, for some they are threatening and bring a portent of judgment, for some they are words of comfort and strength. The words of Jesus are words calling for transformation and change. They are words that call for a world to be restored to the image of what God created it to be and all of this is challenging, frightening, and at times our own vision of things clouds our hearts and minds. It is especially in these moments when the words of Jesus are most important.

The words of Jesus continue to echo the ancient calling of God to bring His light, to repel the darkness, and to expose all that is not as God created it to be. His calling reflects the promises to Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him. This was the calling of Israel, of the City of Jerusalem, and it is the calling of the church. It is a selfless, sacrificial calling, to restore justice, harmony, mercy, and unity to a lost and damaged creation. The words of Jesus call His disciples to join with Him in community to



be agents of change, to be agents of justice, mercy, and truth. The words of Jesus call on His disciples not to just think about and to believe the right things, but to truly live in a way that reflects the mind and heart of God. As image-bearers we are to reflect the nature of God and live a life that reflects that truth.

The words of Jesus challenge the church to be a community that truly reflects the nature of God and is not just an actor pretending to believe. The church is called to trust God with their life, by giving that life over to the will of God so fully and completely that the world cannot deny that its source is God. We must constantly be vigilant in our pursuit of His will, to be effective instruments of transformation bringing light into the darkness. This is the sacred calling of the church.

Questions

1. When you think of the words of Jesus in red what thoughts come to your mind?
2. Why do you think the words of Jesus seem to create different reactions in different people?
3. When you envision the mission of Jesus what do you envision? Why?
4. How would you define what it means to be “light” in the darkness?
5. Why do you think the response of people to the light of true disciples is to glorify God?
6. How do you think the way you live your life reflects upon how people see Jesus and the church?
7. How does the unity of words with actions create trust?
8. Why do people often trust science more than they trust the church?
9. How can the church aide in creating trust of Jesus in our world today?
- 10.What are some ways that the church can truly live out the words of Christ in the world today?
- 11.Why do you think some perceive the church to be their own special genie in the world providing them with what they want, when they want it?
- 12.What are some of the dangers for the church if they do not act as the light that Jesus called them to be?
- 13.How is behavior related to being “light?”



14. What is the purpose of the church?

15. How does Israel's story challenge the church today in its mission?

16. Why do you think community is so important to Jesus in His calling to mission?

17. What does the word "repent" mean to you?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that the calling of Jesus to be the light is a calling into community. A community that acts as a reflection of the nature, and the will, of God. The promises of God stand at the heart of the mission of this community. We are called to stand as participants with God, to bring light into the darkness as a community called by our creator, our savior, our Lord. This is a sacred calling that echoes across the rivers of time to call those who would be faithful to their creator, to trust Him. What are the ways that you see the church fulfilling its calling of being “light” to the world?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words demonstrating His steadfast goodness, his perseverance, and His tremendous love by continuing to pursue the restoration of justice, unity, and harmony, to all of creation. God sent Jesus to speak His words face to face in order to personally call for a devotion to truth that would transform hearts, souls, and the universe. The creator, who in the beginning called light into existence with the words “let there be light” continues to call “light” to shine into the darkness. What are some of the ways that you need to change your life in order to be more effective light in the world?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The calling of God is life changing, life transforming, the calling to true life. Unless I choose to ignore the words of Jesus I cannot help but be transformed into something greater, something better, something different. Change is always frightening and hard for human beings. We resist change, especially change that we cannot control and dominate, but the calling of the Gospel is a calling to allow God to change us into what He intends for us to be. What are some ways that you can demonstrate your willingness for God to change you?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The calling of God is a calling to us as a community to be a light unto the world. At times, one of the most difficult things in life is to be a part of community. Community challenges us continually to sacrifice of ourselves. What are some sacrifices that you are challenged to make for community?