

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

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Ye Are the Light of the World

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Dear Radio Friends,

As we begin the new year, we are going to consider together Jesus' words in Matthew 5:14-16, where Jesus says, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

First, we should notice about these words that this is a declaration. Jesus says, "Ye are the light of the world." This is not something for the Christian to opt out of, but it describes who the Christian is, what the Christian is. This is a continuation of Jesus' earlier thoughts in the Sermon on the Mount. In the earlier verses of the chapter He describes the character of the true child of God as one who is poor, one who mourns, one who is meek, one who hungers and thirsts after righteousness, one who is merciful, one who is pure in heart, one who is a peacemaker, and one who is persecuted for righteousness' sake. In those earlier verses, Jesus was talking about what characterizes us in our relationship to God. God blesses those who bear these characteristics.

Now Jesus begins to speak of our relationship to the world. He says, first: "Ye are the salt of the earth." Then He continues, "Ye are the light of the world." So Jesus is giving us first here a declaration. This is what the Christian is in the world. That is important for us to remember as we think about the year 2009. What are we, who are we, in this world? Not only what should we be, and how should we live, but who we are as Christians in this world.

It is a great privilege to be called by Jesus the "light of the world." Think of the circumstances in which Jesus delivered these words. He was speaking to a group of disciples sitting on a grassy hillside listening to His teaching. These were not the learned and educated of His day, not the intellectuals, not the scribes and the Pharisees; but a band of fishermen, tax collectors, and so on. He said to them, "Ye are the light of the world." What a privilege, what a profound thing. Not the intellectuals. Those are not the light of the world. Not those whom men would esteem and would choose to be the light of the world. But, as we read in I Corinthians 1:26ff., "Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty."

God is saying in this word to Christians: "This is who you are. You are the light of this world. You have the answers. Your eyes are open. You understand reality. You know God." No one else but the Christian has answers in this world.

In the second place, we should notice that we are not light in an original sense. But we are light in a derived sense. In the gospel of John, chapter 8:12, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." These words should be taken together with the words in the Sermon on the Mount. In

Ephesians 5:8 the apostle Paul says to the saints in Ephesus: “Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord.” It is not of ourselves that we bear light in this world. But Christ, who is the light of the world, has filled us with Himself. He opens our eyes. He changes us. And that is why this is also a fact, a declaration.

The light that we bear is something like the light of the moon. The moon reflects the light of the sun. It is our privilege to reflect in this world the light of Jesus Christ.

The third thing that we should see here is that we are light in contrast to the world of darkness. The world in which we live thinks that it has light. That has been true of every age. But that is especially true in the age in which we live—an age of knowledge, of technological advancement, the information age. Everyone seems to know everything that he could want to know. Everyone has an opportunity to be educated. Men are enlightened. They can read. They can write. They can get information very easily.

Yet, the truth is that the world in which we live lies in darkness. Jesus came into this world, we are told in John 1:5, as light. And the darkness, that is, the world, comprehended Him not. With all its knowledge, the world has no answers. The world in its knowledge analyzes things. The world can state problems. But the world cannot give explanations and cannot give solutions to the problems. Its knowledge is merely scientific and biological and mechanical. If you just listen to the wise of our day; if you just listen, for example, to radio talk shows or read the editorials, you will see this. There are great amounts of information that people have. And they can state the problems and the issues of society very well. But they cannot give an answer to these problems. In fact, when the truth becomes evident, very often they hide that truth because, as John 3:19 says, “They love darkness more than light.”

Over against this, the Christian is light. To understand this, we should think of the effect that light has in a dark place. You turn on the lights in a dark room and many things are exposed. Think of the headlights of an oncoming car in the dark night on a dark road. “Whatsoever doth make manifest is light,” says the Scripture (Eph. 5:13). In this sense, the Christian is light in this world. The Christian, and the gospel of Christ reflected in the Christian, have that effect in this world. There is a contrast in life, a contrast in speech, a contrast in interests, a contrast in purpose, a contrast in family living, a contrast in every aspect of the Christian’s life to what is found in this world of darkness.

The Christian has the answers. The Scriptures and the gospel explain how and why man is here. They tell us the cause of the darkness of this world, the sin of mankind. And the Scriptures give the answer to this: Jesus is the light. The cause of the world’s trouble comes from its own rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So we have here this declaration concerning the character of the Christian: he is light in this world of darkness.

Because of this declaration, the Christian has a calling to shine his light in this world of darkness.

Jesus uses two illustrations to emphasize this calling. The first illustration that He uses is that of a city that is set on a hill, which cannot be hid. You should think of the light of a city.

Sometimes we call it “light-pollution.” Think of a big city like Chicago or New York City, in which it is almost impossible at night to see the stars in the sky because of the light of that city. Contrast that to, perhaps, a very remote place, where it is very easy to see the stars at night, and then where you also see the glow of the city in the distance.

During World War II, the lights of the cities were turned off at night so that the incoming bombing planes could not see where the cities were. And it was virtually impossible for those cities to be hidden.

So it is with the light of the Christian. That is what you are as light in this world. Your light cannot be hidden if you are a believer. You are like a city that is set on a hill—Jerusalem, set on the hilltop, which the travelers and pilgrims who came could see from a far distance. By definition, because of what you are, you will show light in this world.

The other illustration that Jesus uses is from domestic life. He says in Matthew 5:15, “Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.” Today you do not turn on a lamp and then take a five-gallon bucket and put that over the top of the lamp. How silly, how ridiculous, that would be. Jesus is telling us that the most pathetic, the most ridiculous, the most tragic thing in this world is a Christian who hides his faith. The true Christian cannot be hid. He cannot escape notice. He will stand out. That is Jesus’ purpose in these illustrations.

We ought to stop and think about this for a little while. Too often, as Christians, we hide the light that Christ has given to us. We say that we are Christians. We make a confession. Others know this about us. But then, instead of letting the light shine, we try very hard to hide it, to be like the world of darkness around us. We want to be accepted by fellow men. We do have the answers. They are there in our mind. They are there in our heart, in what we believe. But they are not on our lips. We do not share them. And no one in the world would know that Christ has given us the light for its darkness. We have opportunities to bring the light of the Scripture and the gospel in our life and we pass those opportunities by. And when that happens, then we should think of this illustration of Jesus. How ridiculous we must look to the world of unbelievers.

This calling to be light is a calling to be light in the world. Jesus says, “Ye are the light of the world.” It is very good for Christians to bear light to each other. It is good to be a light in the church and among the fellowship of believers. There is sin in the church. There are members of the church who need our encouragement and sometimes our correction. By our lives we bear testimony and encouragement to each other in the church.

But it is the world that is the place of darkness. The world needs the light of Jesus Christ. As we live in this world as Christians, we must see this as our purpose. Why has God put us here? Why has God put us here in the beginning of this year, 2009? Because we are to be light in this world.

This ought to be evident to others in the way that we speak, in the way that we treat others, in the way that we play a game, in the way that we order a meal, in the way that we entertain ourselves, in the way that we spend our money, and so on. The world in which we live is becoming more and more dark, greedy, obnoxious, man-centered, unruly, adulterous.

Everyone can agree with that.

And in that world the Christian ought to be a different person who displays the fruits of the Spirit: one who is loving and kind and meek and gentle; one who is patient; one who is a citizen of a different kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, and who lives with his eye on heaven in the midst of this world. The world in which we live is filled with unrest and fear. Many are anxious as they face a new year. They, because of their anxiety, turn to many other solutions like drugs and alcohol. The believer ought to be different. And the believer ought to display that difference. He ought to be one who has hope and who, because of his hope, has peace of mind in this world.

The calling to be light in this world includes giving the answers to the world for its problems. It includes communicating the gospel to unbelievers. Jesus came as light into this world of darkness. Jesus is the reason that the believer is light and is different. Jesus is the answer to the miseries of this world. Jesus is the hope for sinners. He came to save sinners. Part of being light means that we direct unbelievers to Jesus Christ and His cross and point them to faith and belief in Him for forgiveness of sins and for life everlasting.

Again, here, we should pause. Often we think of witnessing as showing up the darkness of this world and condemning the darkness of this world. That is a part of our witness, but light also has a very positive purpose. Light shows the way. It gives direction to others. And this is how it should be in the life of every Christian.

In the book of Acts, chapter 4, we read concerning the early church: "Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." This describes not just the church but the individual believers of the early church taking the gospel with them as they went out from Jerusalem. This is how it should be also in our lives. It is not just for the church to be a light in the world. But ye are the light in the world. The Christian in this world will find himself in situations where people of the world think that they have the light. In college, in the workplace, in other places in this world, others will seem to have the answers. Then we must let the light of the Word of God and the gospel shine.

This is something that we should do continually. Day after day and year after year, the Christian ought to be light in this world. The church has always been a light in this world—from the time of Christ till now. And so it should be in the life of every child of God. The Christian ought to do this regardless of what the world says. The world has never appreciated the light. Everyone who practices evil hates the light. The world does not want the answers to its problems. The world will declare you arrogant and intolerant if you propose answers to the problems of this world. The world will resist the truth about their situation. And it will make you an object of scorn and ridicule.

Does that mean that we should then hide our light? No, Jesus says in the same chapter (Matt. 5), "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." And Jesus means that persecution is a mark of identification with the church in every age. And it is a blessing for the believer to receive such an emblem of his belonging to the church of Jesus Christ.

The reason that we then do not hide our faith is that we love God and we seek the glory of God in the earth also in the salvation of others. Jesus gives this as the purpose of shining our light in this world: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." This means that they will be converted as the result of the gospel that your life preaches to them. And they will themselves give glory to God.

Do the people of this world who know you, know the whole gospel from your life? Do they know that this Christian-living, this light that you bear, is not about yourself but it is about God? That is the point that Jesus is making here. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify, not you, but your Father which is in heaven. Jesus is saying that the Christian, in his witness, is not a man of competition, of display, of self-righteousness. But he is one who lives humbly before God and men, in order that God might receive the glory from him and, through his witness, from others.

We live as lights in this world in order to lead others to glorify God. And to do this, self must be absent. We are reflectors of the light of Jesus Christ. May His light be seen in us.

Perhaps, as you listen today, you are not a believer. Have you seen the light of Jesus Christ shining in Christians? This is not anything in them. This is not anything in us. But we are light in the Lord. It is Jesus' beauty and glory shining in us and through us. It is the light of Jesus Christ. You ought to respond to that light. You must forsake the world of darkness, that God may be glorified in you. You should not embrace the darkness of this world but you should, by faith, embrace Jesus Christ. In this way God will be glorified also through you.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for Jesus Christ Thy Son, who is the light in this world of darkness. Bless us that we may truly shine as His lights in this world in this year, 2009. What hope and what light and what comfort there is in Jesus Christ Thy Son. We pray that His name and Thy name might be glorified through us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.