

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Matthew 5:14-16

Our Lord Jesus, in Matthew 5:14-16, uses a metaphor to teach us something very important. In this metaphor, He likens His disciples to light. This is what He says.

Matthew 5:14. "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.

15 "Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.

16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

If you are a Christian, Jesus is saying that you are the world's light. What an enormous compliment! You see, it is said in 1John 1:5 that 'God is light.' Then Jesus says, 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12; 9:5). And here, we find that the believer is 'the light of the world.' This means that the disciple is what God and Christ are: light. This is not just a compliment. To be identified with God in this way is an enormous responsibility as well. Because whatever light is and does, the disciple is to be and to do.

We will look at this passage with these 2 questions in mind. Firstly, 'What does it mean to be the light of the world?' Secondly, 'What does it take to be the light of the world?'

Shining through godly deeds

Let us consider the first question. *You are the light of the world.* What does that mean? What this light means, Jesus defines it in v. 16 in terms of good works. *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your **good works**,* your light. The light that people see is the good works that we do. The good works are the works that are done in obedience to the living God. That includes our character, our conduct, our actions, and our spoken testimony.

It is when we live a life characterized by righteousness that we shine like stars in the darkness of this world. Paul says in Philippians 2:15, *that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation* (that is why the world is in a state of darkness), *among whom you shine as lights in the world.* You will appear as light in the world when you live a blameless life, a righteous life.

This understanding of Christians as light is found elsewhere in Paul's writings. In Ephesians 5.8, Paul says, *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.* Notice the contrast between darkness and light. 'Once you were darkness, but now you are light.' Paul didn't say, 'You

have become a little brighter than before. You have become a little bit more ethical, more polite.' He did not say that they lived in darkness either. He said that they were darkness. Paul is talking about what is happening inside of the person. Once, inside of you, you were darkness. Your whole character was darkness. But now, you are light in the Lord. Let's read this whole passage to see what Paul means by 'light in the Lord.'

Walking as children of light

Ephesians 5:1. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; The Bible tells us that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all (1John 1:5). And Jesus says, 'You are light.' When we become a new creature in Christ, when we are born again, we are called to be light, to be imitators of God who is light.

2 and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. But notice.

3 But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints;

4 and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. A believer must be morally pure. 'All these sinful things,' Paul says, 'should not even be mentioned in your conversation.'

5 For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. We are saved by grace through faith. Salvation is not of works. But it doesn't mean that the works that you do don't matter. That it doesn't matter if you sin. Because the works that you do prove what you are, whether it is darkness or light. And those who do the works of darkness cannot expect to have any inheritance in the kingdom of God.

6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Let nobody deceive you and tell you that you can cheat, or lie, or rob, and that you are going to be saved because you claim to believe in Jesus. We are dealing with a living God who is a consuming fire, the writer to the Hebrews tells us. You don't play around with the living God.

7 Therefore do not be partakers with them; Do not get mixed up with those people who are immoral and impure. And then, Paul says that light stands out from the darkness.

8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light

9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth),

10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. If you let the light of the Lord shine in your life, if you strive to do what is pleasing to God, you will also shine in the world and produce the fruit of the light, i.e., goodness, righteousness, and truth. That is how Paul explains our function as light in the world.

The disciple who lives in obedience to God is a spiritual light in a world shrouded in darkness. His Christian character bears witness to Christ. He stands out in the world, not because he is good but because God's power is at work in him. When people see us, they will glorify God because they will recognize that it is by the grace of God that we are what we are. They will see that our light is His light, and that our works are His works done in us and through us. That is how people come to Christ.

The light and the city

You are the light of the world. And then, notice the following sentence. *A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.* That statement sounds quite obvious. If you build a city on an elevated area, it will be visible from a great distance. In fact, it will be so visible that it cannot be hidden. What else can we say about that? And besides, why does Jesus talk about a city? What is the connection between ‘the light’ and ‘a city built on a hill?’ That is an excellent question. We should always keep in mind that this passage is concerned with light and that the teaching is addressed to the disciples of Christ. Here the Lord Jesus is comparing the church to a city and He is saying to His disciples, ‘You, the church, are like a city set upon a hill. And such a city cannot be hidden.’

I have to explain to you how we arrive at such a conclusion. Here it is important to put ourselves in the position of the listeners. How would they understand Jesus when He speaks about ‘a city set on a hill?’ Remember that most Jews were brought up in the OT since they were very small. They knew the Word of God very well. When Jesus speaks of a city set on a hill, what would be the first thing that would come to the mind of His listeners? What kind of city is set upon a hill? Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a city set upon a hill. And to the Jewish mind, it is so obvious that people didn’t have to ask Jesus what He was talking about.

Jerusalem: a city set on a hill

If we turn to Isaiah 2, we will read about a city set upon a hill. And we discover that this city is Jerusalem. Jerusalem was to be a city higher than all the cities, all the hills in the world. Isaiah 2:2-3.

Isaiah 2:2. Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it.

3 Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

The mountain of the Lord’s temple refers to the mount where the temple was built. And where was the temple built? On the summit of mount Moriah, in Jerusalem. In this prophecy, Isaiah is saying that the time will come when Jerusalem will have the primary position in the world. The mountain of the Lord’s house will be higher than all the mountains. A great multitude of people will come to this mountain and the word of God will be made known from that place, i.e., from Zion, from Jerusalem.

Another example of a city on a hill is found in Psalm 121. In the first verse of Psalm 121, we read, *I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence comes my help?* What hill is the psalmist talking about? The hill on which Jerusalem is built. ‘I will lift up my eyes to Jerusalem.’ He is not looking at all the hills. He is looking at one particular hill among the hills. Hidden among the hills was the Holy City, Jerusalem. That is where God’s temple is.

A mission for the church

This reminds me of a famous book entitled ‘The City of God.’ In that great book, Augustine speaks about two cities: the city of man and the City of God. These two cities are very different. The city of man consists of heathen people, who live according to their passions. On the other hand, the City of God is made up of believers, who live according to the law of God. And of course, in Augustine’s mind, the City of God is just a different term that refers to the church.

So we begin to see more clearly what Jesus is saying. ‘You, Christians, are that city upon the hill of which Isaiah has spoken under the Spirit of God. It is that hill which will be above all hills, to which all nations will come for their salvation. They will know that God is upon that hill, in that city, the city of God.’

When the Bible speaks about a hill and about a city, that city is often Jerusalem. And today, the church is the new Jerusalem. As Paul says in Galatians 6:16, we are the Israel of God, the true people of God.

Isaiah says something significant in connection with being the light of the world. He says in Isaiah 60:1, *Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.* ‘You are to arise and shine because your light has come.’ Do you know who those words were addressed to? To Jerusalem. Jerusalem was to arise and shine for her light has come. Do you see how this is related to Jesus’ teaching? Jesus says, ‘You are the light of the world.’ And in the next sentence, He says, ‘A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.’ What is the connection? One moment, He talks about the light. And the next moment, He talks about a city. This is where Isaiah 60:1 helps us to understand. Jerusalem was to arise and shine. Or, to put it in the words of Isaiah 42:6, ‘I, the Lord, have given you to be a light to the Gentiles, i.e., to the world.’

What does all this mean for us? You see, Israel was given the high calling of shining as light in the world. Israel was not chosen for its own sake. The nation of Israel was chosen to serve. To serve in what way? To serve as a light for God to the nations so that the whole world may know the truth of God. And today, the church has taken over the function of Israel in the world. This enormous mission has been entrusted to us. You and I have not been called just to be saved. We have been called to function as God’s light in the world. We are to arise and shine forth for God. Now we see clearly the connection between the light of the world and a city set upon a hill. Jesus is comparing the church to a city that shines forth the glory of God.

Hidden in order to be revealed

But how are we going to fulfill this function? We must remember that the church is not an entity that stands apart from its members. The church shines only as the individual members shine. So for a disciple, what does it take to shine for God? Here we want to look at v.15 where Jesus says that no man lights a lamp and puts it under a basket. That is a curious sentence. It is obvious that nobody lights a lamp and puts it under a bushel, or a basket. What is the point of saying that?

In order to understand this, I would like us to look at a similar verse in Mark 4:21-22. We see something very interesting. What does it say?

Mark 4:21. And he said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand? 22 For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.

I would like to draw your attention to v. 22. *For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest.* Notice the intention that is expressed in this statement, ‘except to be made manifest.’ Nothing has been hidden, except in order that it may be made manifest. In the NIV Bible, we read, *For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed.* That is a puzzling statement, isn’t it? That something is hidden in order to be revealed. And in the context of our passage, the ‘something’ that is hidden is the light of course.

But the strange thing is that in Luke 11:33, Jesus says that nobody lights a lamp and then will hide it. The light is meant to be revealed. Luke 11:33 reads like this.

Luke 11:33. "No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it away in a cellar, nor under a peck-measure, but on the lampstand, in order that those who enter may see the light.

The lamp is lit in order to give forth light. You don't put it under a bushel. And yet, it is hidden in order to be made manifest. What is Jesus saying to us here?

Well, we need to go back to the OT. Think about some light that was hidden in order to be revealed in the OT. Light hidden to be made manifest. Think about Gideon's light. You got it?

Gideon's light

In this incident, God called Gideon to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Midianites. Gideon had the help of only 300 men because God did not allow him to have a bigger army. How did he prepare his men for the battle?

Judges 7:16. Then he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers.

Notice the strange objects given to Gideon's men for their fight against the Midianites: trumpets and empty jars with torches inside those jars. Here is where we have light that was hidden with the specific intention of being revealed. What did they do with these pitchers?

Judges 7:19. So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands.

They initiated the battle by blowing their trumpets and smashing their jars, and the light that was inside the jars was made manifest. This created a great confusion in the Midianite camp, a confusion that caused the Midianites to turn on each other with their swords. In the end, the Midianite army had to flee. Gideon did not have to fight. Not a sword was drawn. Perhaps that is the only battle in history that was won with light.

Do you see how the connection between this passage and Jesus' teaching on light is so close? Light hidden in order to be revealed. And Jesus is saying, 'In the same way, you are light. God has not lit that light in order to hide it, but in order that it will be made manifest.'

Breaking the old nature

You see, it is God who kindles the light. We read for example in Psalm 18:28, *For You will light my lamp*. And the Bible tells us that the human spirit is the lamp of the Lord. *The spirit of a man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all the inner depths of his heart* (Proverbs 20:27). God lights us up. But how is the light going to come out of me? Gideon's men had to smash their jars so that the light could come out. In the same way, this outer earthen jar, that old self, our old selfish nature, has to be smashed, broken, before the light can come out.

This word 'broken,' Jesus uses it to talk about Himself. *This is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me* (1Corinthians 11:24). In what sense was Jesus' body broken? His body was broken in the sense that He was crucified on the cross. Now we begin to see the riches of the Lord's teaching. How are we broken? How is my old self destroyed? In the same way, by being crucified. And Paul says, *I have been crucified with Christ* (Galatians 2:20). The cross is what destroys the old self. You see why the cross is so essential in the life of every Christian. The cross is not just to be believed in. The cross must be applied. And when it is applied to your life, it breaks the old self. And then the light comes out.

So what does it take to shine for God? The old self, the old nature must be destroyed through the cross. If truly the cross has been applied into your life, then it will be seen in your conduct. There will be a drastic change in your behavior, in your approach to life, especially in relation to sin.

In this lesson, we studied a passage in which Jesus gives us a glorious mission, the mission to be the light of the world. In this respect, the church has taken over the place that Israel once had. But in order to fulfill this mission, our old self must be smashed. The cross must be applied into our life. When our old nature is broken, the light of God will come out of us and illuminate the darkness of our world.