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## Lights in Darkness

*COMPELLED: The Joy and Simplicity of Introducing People to Jesus Series*

**Matthew 5:14-16**

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As I was thinking, praying, and preparing for the message this week, what it seemed like the Lord wanted us to listen to together, our text got me thinking about something I don't think about very often. It got me thinking about light and the incredible power of light. I was thinking one day, you know, if I have all the lights come down in this auditorium, and I lit a single match, I guarantee all of us would see that little one-inch flame glowing up here.

There was one time where this truth was made abundantly clear to me. I was on a flight from London to Kenya about ten years ago. As we were flying over North Africa, we were over the Sahara Desert. The Sahara is just this massive desert. It's bigger than the land mass of the United States...just this massive desert! It happened to be a night when the moon wasn't shining brightly, either cloudy or a new moon. But for whatever reason, as I looked out the window, it was complete and utter darkness. I couldn't see where the land ended, and the sky began. The horizon was invisible. It was just darkness as far as you could see, this chasm of darkness. As I stared out the window, suddenly there appeared on the desert floor, this singular little light glowing—this little light piercing through the darkness. And as I thought about it, surely it's a campfire of some nomadic tribe that lives in the Sahara. Man, what's their life like? It was just amazing to me. Here's this little campfire down on the desert floor and here I am, six miles above in my airplane seat, and I can see that light six miles away. It was astounding to me just thinking about the great distance that light is traveling. And it got me thinking about the incredible power of light—the way it pierces through the darkness, the way it presses through the darkness and shines forth.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus gathered followers together and He preached His first sermon to them. We call it the Sermon on the Mount, and in that sermon, He compares His followers to light. Just like that campfire in the Sahara, Jesus intends that His followers—that these lights—would have an impact, would pierce through the darkness. If you have your Bible, turn with me to Matthew 5. We're just going to sit in three verses today as we reflect on what Jesus said. So, Matthew 5, starting in verse 14, Jesus says this:

**“You are the light of the world.”** (\*NASB, Matthew 5:14a)

**You are the light of the world.** Imagine being in that first century context and hearing Jesus say those words. This sermon took place in Galilee. Galilee was the backwaters of Israel, kind of unimportant land, overlooked land—somewhat forgotten. The people in Judea and Jerusalem would look down on Galileans. They talked funny; they weren't important in their minds.

As I was thinking through this, I thought if Galilee launched an ad campaign, it might be something like this: *Galilee, honestly, it's not for everyone. (laughter)* And yet in the midst of this unimportant place where amazing things don't happen, something remarkable was breaking forth. Something remarkable was shining forth where remarkable things don't occur, at least in the world's eyes. We know what that's like a little bit, don't we? No one expects anything amazing or any movement or anything important to come from a place like Nebraska, right? Those things start in New York or Los Angeles, or London, or Hong Kong—somewhere else—certainly not here, not with people like

us. And the same was true of the people in Galilee. Important things don't come from there. In Jesus' day they come from Rome if they're political, or they come from Jerusalem if they're religious. Galilee—forgettable—and yet Jesus looks at these people in Galilee and He says, **“You are the light of the world.”**

Now if you're like me, your first response when you hear that might be that you're inclined to pull Jesus aside and you want to say to Him, *“Hey, I think you've got the pronoun wrong. It's not that 'we're' the light of the world; 'You're' the light of the world. You kind of messed up, like Peter. Jesus, You can't say that.”* But Jesus didn't get it wrong. Our text isn't wrong. There isn't some other translation I can tell you about this morning. Jesus emphatically said, *“You are the light of the world,”* and if He said it to His followers in that time and that place, I'm confident He would say it to us today.

I want to say it really emphatically this morning to you. “Church, Christians, Lincoln Bereanites, or whatever we're called, You are the light of the world!” I'll contextualize it a little more. I'll pick on section three. “Section three: You are the light of the world.” If I was really bold, I'd pick a few names out and embarrass you. “You are the light of the world.” We've got to personalize this.

If you're like me, that makes you feel a little overwhelmed. I think to myself, “I don't know that I'm quite up to that task.” Have you ever felt that way? That something has been pronounced on you or a responsibility has been given to you—and it's just too much to bear. You think to yourself, “I can't do it.” I've felt this way a number of times in my life. I remember when I got married. You're preparing and think about the vows you're about to say. If we're really honest, marriage vows are audacious statements, right? (And my wife's right here.) I said, “Until death do us part.” I was in my twenties! (*laughter*) Like what was I thinking, you know? It's a bold proclamation.

I remember bringing my son who is nine years old now, bringing him home for the first time, and holding this little person, and thinking, “Who authorized this? (*laughter*) I don't know that we can do this!” I hope that you feel that way sometimes. I hope you feel like you're in over your head sometimes, because it signifies that we're living beyond ourselves; we're having to step out in faith; we're getting out of our normal easy routines.

See, the great thing for us as Christians is that when we do this, when we live outside our comfort zone, when we step out, we take our responsibilities that are bigger than we can possibly bear, and what it does is, it causes us to cling to faith. When we step out past what we're comfortable with, when we take on too big of a challenge, what we have to do is we start to have this crisis, and we start to realize, “I need help. I need someone to come, someone that's strong enough, big enough to help me follow through on this responsibility, because in and of myself, I just can't do it.”

And if any of you thought this morning when we heard Jesus say, *“You are the light of the world,”* you thought, “Yeah, that's about right; I am pretty great, “we have some people up here that would like to pray for you when this service is done. (*laughter*)

I remember when I went to a buddy's wedding. It was six months after I got married, so I was a pro by now. “I've got this husbanding thing down.” And he asked me (I think he was joking, but he asked me), “Hey, do you have any advice?” And I was like, “Yeah, I do.” But I said then what I think I would still say now. Six months into marriage I realized: I don't have it in me to love my wife the way she needs to be loved. I can't do it...can't do it. But I know that God can. I know God knows exactly what my wife needs, so it's causing me to just run after God as hard as I can. I

have to learn from Him because, left to myself, all I really do is love myself. I become very self-centered. I have to cling to this person who can teach me, who has the capacity to provide the type of love that she needs.

I want to encourage you this morning. I want to encourage you that you *are* the light of the world, and that is overwhelming, but it's absolutely true! And the reason it's so great is it causes you to seek out someone that can deliver on that statement. And that's a good thing because we are people that are with Jesus, aren't we? We're with Jesus! Listen to His words about Himself here in the gospel of John. In John 8:12, He says this:

**“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in the darkness but will have the light of life.”**

That sounds better, doesn't it? Jesus *is* the light of the world. Whoever walks with Him **will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life**. We already talked about how this took place in Galilee, and the people that were surrounding Jesus weren't all-stars. These were people who were utterly normal, and as impressive a group that you are this morning, I can just tell you that as a people, we are just average people, right?

But see what Jesus does, and what God does through Him is, He takes what is normal and He makes it extraordinary. He does amazing things with normal people. These first listeners were utterly normal—didn't have any privilege, didn't have any pedigree; they didn't have all the right religious diplomas on the wall, but Jesus looked at them and said, “*You* are the light of the world.” And here's the thing about them. They were people who became disciples of Jesus. They laid their life down; they clung to Him, and in doing that, they clung to the very source of light and life itself. And that changes everything...it changes everything!

See, what Jesus came and revealed to this group, and continues to reveal, is what God is doing in the world. And what God is doing in the world is He, through Christ, is taking the ordinary, taking people like you and me—hurt people, broken people, confused people, overwhelmed people—and He's bringing about the very life of Christ inside people just like you and me. That's the work that God is doing in Christ, and that's why Jesus can proclaim so boldly, “You are the light of the world.” The reason He can say that so boldly is because we are with Him, and we are the light because He is the light. And as we cling to Him, as we seek Him, as we get near to Him, His life starts to grow inside of us, such that it gets to the point where He is the one that's living our life—not necessarily us anymore. If you're here this morning and you have not come to the point where you've said, “I'm in over my head and in life generally, and I've got to find a source bigger than myself that can pull me through all that I'm experiencing,” I want to encourage you to place your confidence, your trust in Jesus. Place your faith in Jesus, because He is the light, and those who are with Him have found the light of life.

You see, the great privilege that God has invited us into, is to be with Him. And to be with Him, engaged in the work that He is doing, and as we seek to go out into the darkness, what happens is that we start to shine, and God is made known through us. It's an incredible thing to be engaged with Him in, because we're light! And light, of course, is intended to shine. That's what light does. Light illumines things. Light gives direction. Light is a conspicuous thing—it shines forth. So listen as Jesus continues at the end of verse 14, and into verse 15. He says:

**“A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.”**

Now I don't think we hear it quite right when Jesus says this. I actually think He's intending to be a little bit funny; I think He's being a little bit sarcastic here. His first listeners would have chuckled, because of course these images are ridiculous images—a city that's hidden? Ridiculous! Someone lighting a lamp and then covering it up? That's silly. Cities don't hide. You don't light a lamp in order to get light and then just cover it up. If we were camping in the woods and we were on a dark trail and someone lit a flashlight and then put it in their backpack, all of us would be like, "Hey, we're gonna be in the poison ivy soon. Get that light back out!"

I think the response He's trying to provoke is for us to say, "Well, duh! Light shines. That's what light does. Of course, Jesus, of course you can't hide a city. Light is meant to shine!" We, as lights, are meant to shine. But I think this has gotten a little complex in our day, hasn't it? See the current cultural mood that's coming at us as Christians is that our faith is supposed to be a private thing. Like, "Don't bring that into the public sphere. The public sector, that's where your faith doesn't belong. Faith needs to be private." But I want to argue with you this morning that the idea of private faith is just as ridiculous as the idea of a city on a hill that isn't seen. Or of lighting a lamp and covering it up. It's ridiculous! It's not that I'm saying, I'm not trying to urge you to let your faith be public. I'm not saying that. I'm saying, faith *is* public. That's the nature of faith. Light shines. Faith is lived.

Those of us who have placed our confidence in Jesus, we know that everything we do goes through this filter of Him. And so it's impossible for me to somehow separate my faith from the major decisions we need to make in life, at work, whatever I'm doing. Faith affects everything. Light shines. Faith is lived. Of course that doesn't mean that we as Christians shouldn't take a moment for some self-reflection and ask ourselves, "How is our faith being lived out? How are others possibly experiencing the light that is supposed to be shining forth?" So, listen to Jesus here in verse 16. He says:

**Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.**

I love that verse. Let your light shine in such a way that when people look, they don't even see you. They see beyond you and they see Jesus. And as they see Jesus, people that don't know God are caused to glorify Him. They are caused to say, "Man, whatever is happening there, it's amazing... it's amazing. Whatever is behind that is extraordinary; what an incredible thing... what an incredible thing!"

We as Christians need to own the fact, I think, that at times as we try to live out our faith, at times maybe we've allowed our faith to become equated with things that are probably unhelpful at best. At times maybe we've allowed our faith to get conflated with maybe a particular political viewpoint, either on the right or on the left, and we start to equate our faith with that point of view. Or maybe a posture toward the world, we say, "Well, if you're a person of faith, you have to think about things this way." Sometimes we have let our faith be defined only in terms of what we're against. When you look at studies of what the world thinks of us, they usually say that Christians are pretty close-minded; they're pretty judgmental.

I don't know; I'm not giving total credence to that, but I do know there are times I can be judgmental. I have that capacity in me. Where that might be true, I just want to own it and say, "You know what? Maybe." And I want to turn my eyes back to Jesus and consider the way He

shone forth when He was walking on this earth. I want Him to shine, not me. I don't want to obscure what He is doing.

So think about the way Jesus lived on this earth. I think it's safe to say that He lived according to love. Love is what reigned for Him. Now we have to define love. What we mean by love is, we love something when we seek to bring about what is good for that thing or that person, and good is defined as what God says is good. So, does that mean that Jesus upset people sometimes? Absolutely! He never acquiesced to the world in order to be liked. But He did live by love, and He was always seeking to bring good, as God defines it, into the lives of those He interacted with.

Jesus lived with this rock solid, grounded faith in God's love for Him. He was so confident in that, that when others would curse Him, he didn't have to return the curse; He could return blessing. Think about Him on the cross. His murderers were right there. He looks and He says, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing."

Blessing just flowed from Him and it was grounded in His sense of identity in the Father. He lived by wisdom; He so wisely navigated the complexities of life. Jesus did all this and more. He walked through life so well. We have to ask ourselves, "Does the world need this? Does the world that is marked by darkness, need this?" And the answer is, "DESPERATELY!" The world is waiting; it's longing for the people of God to reflect Christ to them, to bring light into the dark places. As we were reminded this past week to, *Be present*. Our book *42 Seconds* reminded us to be present, to be thoughtful, to be intentional, to be vulnerable, to be humble. As we're interacting with those outside the church, the world is waiting for this. We are the people who are the light. We are the light because we are with the source of life. We are the light of the world because He is the light of the world.

Now, as we've been going through this *Compelling* series, we've been saying, "We've got to get practical." This can't just be the kind of thing that at the end of the service we say, "Well, that was really interesting; where are we having lunch?" We want to try to think about how we can apply these things. So, with the last few minutes I want to think about applications for this. As I think about this text and the way it impacts me, there are two main questions that come to mind for me.

The first one is this: Am I seeking to get as close to the source of light as is humanly possible? Am I intentionally running after Jesus, cultivating my relationship with Him? Am I doing that? Am I getting near to Him?

I mentioned my best friend earlier; his name is Jeff. There are times we speak on the phone—about every two weeks—and every time I'm on the phone with Jeff, Jenee' never needs to ask who I'm talking to because we start to talk funny, like our whole verbiage changed—the way we pronounce things changed, our pace of speaking changed. We take on this new voice that's like this Jeff/Ryan voice. It's probably a little ridiculous. I'd be embarrassed if you heard it, I bet. But see what happens is, I'm so close to Jeff, as we're together we rub off on one another. Our relationship transforms both of us into different people. That's the way friendship works; that's what is so great about it. And our friendship with Jesus is no different.

As I seek to be close to Him, as I interact with Him and listen to Him and try to hear His voice, He starts to live in me and He starts to transform the way that I hear and the way that I see and the way that I think—the way that I live my faith out in the world. As I get near to Jesus, my life starts to be transformed and starts to look a lot like His life. And so, "Am I doing that?" If not, what do I need

to change so that I am doing that, because the world does not need more Ryan, right? The world needs Jesus. Are we people that are getting close to the light? That's the first question. Here's the second question:

Am I living in such a way that I am actively pressing out into the darkness on a regular basis in my life? Am I getting near to those who need to be exposed to the light of the world? Let's think through a couple of ways that we might do that.

What if we really believe that when Jesus says we are the light of the world, how would that change the way we walk into work? If we thought at my workplace there is darkness, not that the people are bad; none of this is about that. It's just that there is darkness. There are people who need the light of Christ. What if I went in to work thinking, "I'm the light of the world because the source of all light is right here with me." How might that change the way I approach work?

Or our neighborhoods—how would it change the way we interact in our neighborhoods? Maybe it would mean at the end of the day we wouldn't just close the garage door immediately. Maybe we would linger a little bit. And trust me, I know at the end of a workday, that's just the last thing you want to do. Let's just be honest. What you want to do is just go veg, right? But what if we were people that thought, and actually believed Jesus when He says, "You are the light of the world," and we lingered long enough with our neighbors, and got to know their families? We start to listen and maybe start to hear, as Jesus hears, some of the hurt in their voice, and we ministered to them there? What if we lived that way?

I love these baby and child dedication weekends, because I think about all the kids that come to this church. There are so many kids here. I guarantee if we charted it, I bet they go to every school in this city. And what if we were people, that in our families and with our friends' kids, and with our nieces and nephews, what if we were people who actively cultivate the life and light of Christ in our families and with our kids? And as they are growing up, they are going out into their schools and they are living as lights in dark places. What an amazing thing that would be!

We are a pretty big church. On an average weekend, about 4000 of us walk through these doors and call this our church home. What if we became people that came and worshiped and glorified God and worshiped the Son and, as we departed, we saw it as this great privilege to go out as 4000 points of light out into the neighborhoods...out into the work places, out into the schools and regions surrounding Lincoln. How long would it take before this city would start to be transformed? I don't think it would take very long.

Now maybe you're like me. I'm a pastor, so I kind of live in this world with all these Christians all day. It's like *Light Bright World*. It's just a lot of light. Now that doesn't mean it's all good, trust me, okay? I work with Brian Olesen, and let me tell you something. "It's rough!" (*laughter*) I texted Brian last night to say, "Hey, is that okay? I hope you didn't get offended by that." He was very mad. (*laughter*)

Maybe for people like me, you realize I'm not surrounded. I'm mostly with Christians all the time and I need to think, "How do I actively change my routine a little bit so I actually go to places where the light of Christ needs to shine forth?" Maybe I need to change where I go to get a cup of coffee, or where I shop. I need to pray about those I'm working with, or I go to get groceries with. I need to do something different, but somehow, I need to change up the routine so I'm pressing out into the darkness.

We're a big church, and the great thing about that is that I think if we plotted all the places we frequent in a week, we would see all of Lincoln and the surrounding areas just dotted with little points of light. And I want us to be people that believe God is going to do something through that. We need to be people that boldly and bravely believe that what Jesus says is true. We are the light of the world, because we are with the light of the world—and He will shine through us. The world desperately needs to know Him.

As we close, I want to turn your thoughts again to the book we've been reading together—*42 Seconds*. This week our challenge is to: *Be brave*. I want to challenge you to think about, "What is one step that you could take, because if brave is the right word, there are times when it is a little intimidating to do this. But let's believe Jesus—that we are the light of the world because we are with the source of light. We are with the light of life. Let's bravely step out, believing that as we step out, as we shine forth, people will see our good works and they won't think about us. They will see beyond us. They will see Jesus Christ, and they will glorify our Father in heaven. What an amazing thing that would be! Let's pray.

*Our Father, we thank You that You have chosen to make us Your own. We have become Your children. You brought light into the darkness of our lives and we thank you for that. Father, I ask that You would help us to be brave and bold, that we would have this deep conviction that we are the light of the world because You are the light of the world. So, we ask that You would give us deep conviction and courage to step out. We thank You for what You're doing through us, what You're doing in Christ and the fact that, at the end of the day, Lord, the world will come to praise You. We pray these things in Your name, Amen.*

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