

# *The Practice of Community*

## *Part 4 – Shining Together*

### Matthew 5:14-16

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 25, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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**<sup>14</sup>“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16, NRSV)**

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The image of light is one of the most stark and familiar images found in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> In ancient Israel, light was often used as a metaphor for knowledge, truth and revelation. Same in our day. The person who understands is considered to be “enlightened.” And the person who does not understand is said to be “in the dark.” In those days, the person who passed on truth to others might be referred to as the light. Daniel 12:3 exemplifies this: **“Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”<sup>2</sup>**

As you look closer at how this image is used in the Old Testament, it becomes clear that Israel was envisioned as the primary light in the world, and specifically a light which was meant to bring illumination to the Gentiles, those beyond Israel. This is affirmed even in the New Testament. The previous chapter in Matthew quotes Isaiah 9:1-2,

**“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,  
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan,  
Galilee of the gentiles—  
the people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and  
shadow of death  
light has dawned.”**

Remember that God’s whole purpose in marking Israel as his chosen people, and blessing them as he did, was so that ultimately *through Israel he would bless all other nations*. The Lord made Israel a light, but that light had

a purpose beyond itself. That purpose was eventually embodied in the birth of Christ, the Son of God become human. It’s no wonder that a star was sent to illuminate that event, and no wonder that even today the image of light is the most striking image connected to Christmas. Eventually that baby born in the manger would grow to become a man who would declare this about himself: **“As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”<sup>3</sup>** Ultimately, through his death and resurrection, Christ would open the way for all people, Jew and Gentile alike, to be enlightened to the truth and enter into the life and grace of God now made freely available.

With all this in mind, it is absolutely startling that Jesus then declares here to his disciples, **“You are the light of the world.”** And though he said this to his first disciples, I believe he meant it to also apply to all future disciples, right on down to us. *We* are the light of the world. This may be the greatest honor ever given to the church. Jesus did say that he was the light of the world as long as he was in the world. Now, having left the world and returned through the Holy Spirit to live within and among us, we are that light! It’s astonishing! It is through us, the church, that the rest of the dark world is to find illumination.

I see at least three very relevant implications here. Let me take them one at a time.

First, Jesus specifies here that we *are* the light. We are not told that we must go out and *become* the light. No, that work has *already been done for us* by God. There is something that the Lord, through Christ, has already accomplished in us that is now going to make us stand out in this world. We’ve been talking about this all along in this series, that a significant part of our distinction in this world is the unity which Christ has created among us, even though we are so different from one another, and so different in ways which, in any other context, would divide us.

A few weeks ago my wife, a Chicago Bears fan, and I watched the Bears-Packers playoff game, a nail-biter that came down to the last play before the Bears were

<sup>1</sup> I’m indebted here to Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Commentary: Sermon on the Mount* (Zondervan, 2013), 58.

<sup>2</sup> This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> John 9:5

able to seal their victory over their bitter rival. My enduring image from that game will be the 60,000+ exuberant fans decked out in Bears' gear celebrating in the stands long after the game was decided. The party went on and on. Total strangers hugging, singing, weeping together, a complete lovefest. By all appearances that night, the people of the Windy City are a very united people. But we know better, and it occurred to me as I watched that scene unfold, that the unity on display was only as deep as the navy blue, orange and white on the team jerseys. Take that exact same group of seemingly united people, and you will find that on another day and in another context, they can easily be divided. Ask that same group of Bears fans about politics, for example, and I guarantee you that their team-spirit unity will immediately shatter. The center, their shared love of the same football team, cannot hold.

That phrase comes from a poem by the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, written after WWI in response to the chaos and division which he watched descend upon the world. This is the poem's first line: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold." This must not be true of the church, assuming that Christ is and remains our center. All the things which might otherwise divide us – race, politics, gender, economics, personality, preferences, even football – those differences cannot threaten the center which God has created which binds us together and holds us together, for that center is Christ himself. This makes the church a very, very unique community in this world.

It's important to note here that the pronouns in this passage are plural. When Jesus says, "**You are the light of the world.**", the "you" is plural. One Christian by himself or herself is not the light of the world. No, there is something about the way that the Lord has *united as together as one* which, when witnessed by the world, makes the world stop and ask, "What kind of people are these?" Remember the image of the temple a few weeks ago. Individually we are all just ordinary and ill-fitting stones. But the Lord, through Christ, has somehow brought us together to form something beautiful. Therefore, those who see our unity are not impressed with the stones, but with the master builder who could take such dissimilar stones and create from them one unified structure.

That leads us to the second implication, which is that as the light of the world we are not shining together to reflect our own glory. Light doesn't illuminate itself! To bring illumination to the world is not *our* mission.

This is God's mission, what has been called the *missio Dei*, which he is carrying out *through us*. I love how New Testament scholar, Scot McKnight, defines that mission: "God's mission is to redeem a broken creation (as a result of sin and disobedience) through the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus, through the gift of the Spirit to God's people, in order to bring creation into its perfect order."<sup>5</sup> God wants to shine through us to bring a dark world back into the light. But as Jesus makes clear later in this passage, it's all being done to the glory of our Father in heaven, not for our own glory. In a way, we are like the moon. The moon has no light in itself. On its own, it's cold and dark. But when it faces the sun, it seems to come alive with brilliance, so much so that when the moon is full and the night is clear, you can see almost everything by the light of the sun reflected though the moon. But make no mistake, the light is still sunlight. Moonlight actually doesn't exist. Similarly, the light we shine is not our own light, and so it always must bring glory to the source, which is not us.

Of course, even for the moon to reflect light to the earth, it cannot be hidden from the earth. And that's the third implication from Jesus' declaration here that we are the light of the world. Put simply, we must not be hidden from the world. Jesus is blunt: "**A city on a hill cannot be hidden.**" And if you light a lamp in your house, you don't hide it under a bucket. Doing so completely negates the purpose of the light. This is not complicated. While we are called to live lives which are very distinct from the world around us – that's part of what it means to be holy, or set apart – we are *not called* to live those distinct lives separate from the world. Though not *of* the world, we are nonetheless sent *into* the world for the sake of the world. This was certainly the way we would describe Jesus' life, so how can it not also describe the lives of his followers. As commentator William Barclay once put it, "There can be no such thing as secret discipleship, for either the secrecy destroys the discipleship, or the discipleship destroys the secrecy."<sup>6</sup> To live together in Christ is to live together in Christ before a watching world.

Of course, one primary way we are sent into the world to bear the light of Christ is by obeying God's call to serve the world, to meet the needs of those around us. And it's these "good works" done in the name of Christ that Jesus says here will bring glory to our Father in heaven. It's instructive to note that Matthew chooses a very specific word here for "good".<sup>7</sup> The Greek word *agathos* is translated "good," and describes something that is intrinsically good in nature or quality.<sup>8</sup> A law,

<sup>4</sup> Latin for "mission of God."

<sup>5</sup> McKnight, 60.

<sup>6</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1975), 123.

<sup>7</sup> I'm indebted here to Barclay, 125.

<sup>8</sup> <https://biblehub.com/greek/18.htm>

for instance, might be good in this way because it is morally sound. But that's not the word Matthew chooses. Instead, he uses the Greek word *kalos*, also translated "good," but which describes something that is not only good, but also attractive, noble, commendable.<sup>9</sup>

Think about the difference this way. Can you imagine that there are "good" Christians in this world who live very moral lives, who know the truth of God's Word inside and out, who practice their religion faithfully, and yet whose lives are in no way inviting to others in the world around them because they are so lacking in the sorts of qualities which attract others. I think this could be said of many of the religious leaders in Jesus' day. It's no less true in our day. There is a goodness which repels others, often because the righteousness displayed is tainted by self-righteousness. Lots of *agathos*; very little *kalos*. And so while Jesus is not diminishing the need for moral purity and distinctiveness in this world, he is stressing the need to be good in ways that others find disarming and appealing.

With this in mind, it's worth noting that later in his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus seems to contradict himself when he introduces a whole section on doing good works by saying, **"Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."**<sup>10</sup> So which is it Jesus, do we do our good deeds in public, or do we do them in private? If you keep on reading in this section, the contradiction evaporates as it becomes clear that the difference is a level of intent. We don't do good works to get others to praise us or think more highly of us. No, we do them for God's glory, and if that is our intent, then doing them in public is not only encouraged, but necessary. How else will God be glorified by others if our goodness is always kept private?

I think a part of this is the necessity to go out together in the world to represent Christ without pretending we are something we are not. When I share the gospel with nonbelievers in the world, I try to be very clear that they are hearing this message from somebody whose life is, in many ways, still a mess. When I was a young man first exploring Christianity, one of the most powerful impressions made on me in those days was from some men in the church, many of them youth group leaders, who clearly loved Jesus, but who also made no effort to cover up their short-comings. This humble vulnerability was very attractive to me because I knew that I was also a mess. So if messy people can follow Jesus, maybe I can also follow Jesus. You see, the world does not need perfect examples of Christ-

followers, it just needs living examples. So we don't hide the light from the world, but we also don't hide the fact that it shines through very broken lamps. As we do so, the light becomes attractive in a *kalos* sort of way, and also brings glory to its ultimate source, and not to the very imperfect lamp through which it shines.

To be clear, our good works out in the world will eventually need to be accompanied with good words. We've covered this many times before, so let me just remind you briefly that in no way is Jesus letting us off the hook here when it comes to evangelism. Many people in today's church love that old quote sometimes attributed to St. Francis: "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words." But it's hard to imagine that St. Francis actually said this because he spent much of his life putting the gospel into words. It's also misleading, suggesting that a watching world will see our good works and somehow distill the gospel from our kindness alone. You feed me when I'm hungry so that must mean that Jesus died for my sins and I am saved by grace! That's a stretch.

I suggest a more biblical statement would be, "Preach the gospel at all times, and *when the time is right* use words." Yes, it's good to lead with our actions. Furthermore, we are to serve people around us whether or not they ever want to hear the message of Christ. The reactions of others are not our responsibility. But at some point we are going to find that our good works will earn us the right to be heard, and when that happens we need to be ready to give people a reason for the hope they see in us, a reason for the unity that has been created among us which is so other-worldly, a reason for our motivation to love and serve even those who oppose us. Paul puts it this way in Romans 10:14, **"But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"** Good works often lead to good will. When that happens, good words become necessary.

To make all this practical, I believe that a part of our practice of community involves us not only being together as a community as we grow in Christ, but also involves us *going out together* as a community as we follow Christ on his mission to bring light to a dark world. Our mission statement has articulated this all along. Faith Presbyterian Church is called to be *a community loving Christ, building disciples, serving all*. We believe God has called us as a church to three things, to love Christ above all and in all, to grow as his disciples so that we learn to live life as he would live life if he were in our shoes, and then to go out into the world to serve those God puts into our path, bearing witness to

<sup>9</sup> <https://biblehub.com/greek/2570.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 6:1

the gospel with our works *and* our words. Probably in that order.

But the word “community” is key. In a way, it’s a modifier to each of the three statements which follow, and emphasizes what we have been talking about in this series on the practice of community. We are a community loving Jesus *together*. We are a community building disciples *together*. And we are a community serving all *together*. Again, the “you” is plural. You alone, that is not the light of the world. You together are that light! And when we go out together, I believe the light shines far brighter.

Some of you know that Esther and I help lead an annual month-long Torchbearers Bible School in Kenya called Angaza. Interestingly enough, the word “Angaza” is Swahili for “illuminate.” Typically we have about 70 young adult students and staff from all around the world, about half from Africa. And in our time together we are very intentional that we are not only a community who loves Jesus together and grows as disciples together, but also part of our discipleship is to go out into the community and represent Jesus together. And so at least twice a week we break up into groups of very diverse people who sometimes share very little other than Christ, and we go serve street kids in the neighboring city, or disabled children in a nearby school. Another team walks through town to share the gospel with anybody willing to conversation. Here is a group of us serving local high school students who are coming to explore Christianity. When we go out, we are such an odd looking group of Kenyans, Albanians, Canadians, and Germans, that we often have plenty of people wanting to know more about who we are, and what it that has brought us together.

As we go out, two things happen. First, serving in this way together unites us at a deeper level. I don’t really understand this, but I have found that you can know a group of people well and still find that when you share a common mission your bonds deepen. If you’ve ever been on a mission trip here at Faith with people you’ve worshipped with for years, or joined us for one of our Reaching Out Resource Fairs like we had yesterday, you know that when you serve together something happens that deepens your connection. It’s a beautiful thing and I’ve experienced it there in Kenya, and back here in Sacramento, many times.

But secondly, as I already alluded to, when those we go to serve encounter this group of very diverse people united in love in spite of differences that usually divide people in this world, they cannot help but take notice. And if they get to know us better, they will find that the differences don’t stop at race and nationality and language. Our personalities, politics, preferences, even

much of our theology, is very diverse. And yet the center holds. Our prayer is that such unity in diversity might lead people to praise whatever master builder could create such a community.

One of the things I love about this congregation is that so many of you are so willing to go out in the name and spirit of Christ to serve others in our city and beyond. But I want to keep challenging us to prayerfully consider how the Lord is calling us to do so together. Again, Reaching Out is a beautiful example of this. One of the other easy ways we can move in this direction is for your Life Groups to pray together about how the Lord might call you to serve together. Some of your groups are already doing this, which is fantastic. I’d love to see every group serving out beyond the so-called “walls” of this congregation. This doesn’t have to be every week, even sporadically can be a great step forward. And we must not make age, ability, or schedule an excuse. We have people in their 90’s alongside very busy people serving at Reaching Out every month. So if you’re in a Life Group, or some other similar group – even your family! – would you start this week to give your focus on asking the Lord how and where he wants you to go out and serve *together*. As you do, one of the benefits you will soon discover is that serving together will deepen the bonds you already share.

This is something we have to keep working at because, frankly, the tendency in the church is so often a pull inwards towards comfort and familiarity. This cannot be our tendency. We *are* the light of the world, illuminated by Christ together to bear witness in a dark world to a hope that is available to everybody. This light cannot – must not! – be hidden. With that in mind, I leave you with a short modern parable I’ve probably told you before, a parable which may help encourage us to take to heart what Jesus is teaching us here. It’s fittingly called The Parable of the Lighthouse.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was a lighthouse and attached to it, a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves, they went out day or night tirelessly searching for the lost.

Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding areas, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats

were bought and new crews were trained. The little life-saving station grew.

Some of the new members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and so poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in an enlarged building. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they re-decorated it beautifully and furnished it as a sort of club.

Less of the members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired life boat crews to do this work. The mission of life-saving was still given lip-service but most were too busy or lacked the necessary commitment to take part in the life-saving activities personally.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin, and some spoke a strange language, and the beautiful new club was considerably messed up. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal life pattern of the club. But some members insisted that life-saving was their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life-saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the life of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own life-saving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. They evolved into a club and yet another life-saving station was founded. If you visit the seacoast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, only now most of the people drown.<sup>11</sup>

May it never be so with this life saving station called Faith Presbyterian Church. We together are the light of the world. Let us continue to let our light shine so others in our dark world will see what our good God has done in us and give him glory.

Amen.

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### The Next Step

#### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Matthew 5:14-16. This is likely a very familiar passage. Anything new that you notice here this time through?
2. Why are Jesus' disciples the light of the world? What do you think he means by this?
3. How might we hide that light? Why would we hide that light?
4. How do you think people can see the good works of Christians and praise God? How is that connection made from one to the other?
5. Are good works ever enough? Or are good words also necessary?
6. We can go out and share Christ by serving others on our own. What changes, however, when we go out *together* to share Christ? Can you answer this question from your own experience?
7. Are you intentional about going out with others in the church to serve together? How might you do so? (For Life Groups: Are you willing to commit together to prayerfully explore ways that you could at least occasionally go serve together?)
8. How can we as a congregation avoid seeing what happened in the Parable of the Lighthouse happen to us?

#### **Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.**



*What does Jesus mean when he tells us that we are the light of the world?*

<sup>11</sup> Author unknown.