

## Let Your Light Shine

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The theme of my Lenten sermons is “How Then Shall We Live: The Liberating commands of Christ.” The word “then” implies something that has gone before. For example, God was in Christ: How Then Shall We Live? Jesus has come into our lives calling us to follow: How Then Shall We Live?

The commands of Christ are liberating because behind every imperative, “you must” is the indicative: what God has done, is doing.

### I

Today’s command is let your light shine. It has the power of the indicative behind it: “You are the light of the world.”

The command is part of a three-fold indicative/imperative set of teachings.

1) You are the salt of the earth. Stay salty or you will be of no worth to the world.

2) You are the light of the world. Don’t hide it under a bushel.

3) You are a city set on a hill. Don’t turn out the lights. God has placed you here to be seen (Matthew 5:13-15).

So Jesus concluded this sequence with a liberating command:

Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Abba in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

The Kingdom God is at hand. It has dawned its light on you, and we are not to be timid about it: Let it Shine. You are the light of the world. Are. The indicative. Let your light shine throughout the world. The imperative.

## II

Isaiah the prophet spoke about Israel, God's servant being a light to the world:

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6)

Now Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is shining upon us, inside us, and that we are the let that light shine. And this shining involves good works.

This command of Jesus may seem at tension with another command of Jesus, which may be summarized: "Keep it Hid!"

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and the streets...And when you fast, do

not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others (Matthew 6:1,2,16).

Is there a contradiction here? Romulus Linney has written some fictional stories about Jesus in his book *Jesus Tales*. One of them is entitled “How St. Peter Got Bald.” The gist of the story is that Jesus’ teaching were so confounding and perplexing that they left Peter scratching his head over and over in puzzlement. That’s how St. Peter got bald!

So in one place Jesus says, “Let it shine!” and in another place he says “Keep it hid”. The difference comes with the motive, with the heart. If you practice your piety *in order to be seen* by others it is a false piety. In other words don’t do it for show. For the ego. The very word hypocrite means “play actor”. You show off your faith as if on stage.

However if you practice your faith as the light of God bursting forth from you in order that God be glorified, then let it shine.

One of the reasons for the rapid growth of Christianity in the first centuries of its life was what Christians did for those outside the church. They built hospitals for the sick, hostels for travelers, orphanages for parent-less children.

They took care of the sick in time of plague. People saw God's love in action and were drawn to God and to Christianity.

### III

The Quakers have a belief that pervades their lives and how they treat others and each other. It is called the "inner light." They believe all people are born with the light of God within. Famous Quaker theologian and mystic, Rufus Jones, wrote:

The Quaker in the seventeenth century gave this message [the inner light] a new and powerful emphasis. In fact they were the first organized body of Christians who built their entire faith upon the principle that something of God is in every man. This broke completely with the Augustinian conception [original sin] raised in their time to a new stage of importance by John Calvin's interpretation of it [total human depravity]. Their famous phrase was "inward light"...Quakers meant by their inward light what the noblest of mystics had meant by the divine ground or foundation of the soul... something of God... is formed into the structure of the human soul.

So while Augustine spoke of "original sin" and Calvin "total human depravity" Quakers spoke of the inward light.

This belief propelled them to be the first Christian group in America to oppose slaver. First they gave up their own slaves, paying them back pay for years of forced labor; then they fought for the abolition of slavery in the public realm. The belief in the inner light changed their relationships, economics and politics. How they let their light shine!

#### IV

So the inner light change how we view other people, but it also changes how we look at ourselves.

We've been taught so much about "original sin" and "total human depravity" that our belovedness as God's child created in the image of God has been deeply hidden in us. It is the contribution of Celtic Christianity to emphasize that we are born in "original goodness" rather than "original sin". Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in a poem that Christ has shown us who we are: "Immortal diamond".

We have been warned that the greatest and first of the seven deadly sins is *Pride*: thinking too highly of ourselves. I think for most of us the great sin is *Sloth*: thinking too lowly of ourselves.

In a favorite benediction I sometimes use there is the phrase: May God give you the grace not to sell yourself short." It resonates deeply because we have been

taught to undervalue who we are. When Nelson Mandela emerged from 27 years in prison to become the President of South Africa he quoted words from

Marianne Williamson:

You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people the permission to do the same. And as we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

For those raised on original sin and total depravity, or those lived in one kind of oppression or another, these words are liberating.

We might say our light is a "borrowed light" as the moon borrows its light from the sun. so it is God's light we shine when we do good works. And it is God we glorify.

So don't play small. That is false piety. "Let your light so shine before others that they will see your good works and glorify your Abba in heaven."

From the fourth century desert mothers and fathers comes a story. A monk traveled to see desert father, Abba Joseph for spiritual advice. He was not satisfied with his spiritual life. He said to Abba Joseph: “I’ve done my prayers, kept the commandments. I try to live in peace and purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Abba Joseph answered, “You could become flame.”

The story moves me. Perhaps because I yearn to burn with God’s own love, become flame with God’s fire.

Is this what Moses experienced on Mt. Sinai when his face shone with God’s own light? Or what Jesus experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration and his face shone like the sun? Is this what happens when God’s love fills us and our ego fades away and we let God’s love and life and light show?

## VI

So let’s talk about us, Grace Baptist Church. We’ve been called to let our light shine, to become flame, to be the light of God’s love to the Statesville community. The world is not served by our playing small. Let your light shine. Your good works glorify God. Both as individuals and as a church. When you support 5<sup>th</sup> street you glorify God and let your light shine. When you work in the public sphere on behalf of the poor, forgotten, outcast and vulnerable you glorify

god and let your light shine. When you gather to worship in song, prayers and word you glorify God and let your light shine.

You are not what one has called *McChurch*, and Americanized, homogenized bland form of Christianity. You are Grace Baptist Church on Club Drive, a unique spiritual community of God's live and life and light. You are a people of justice and compassion, tolerance and openness. People are searching for a church community like you. Don't shrink back. Don't hide your light under a bushel. Let Your Light Shine.

Jesus' words are meant for you: "Fear not little flock; it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Where the kingdom shines on you, in you, let it shine.

A few years back I wrote a hymn based on our text for today, Matthew 5:14-16 and on Psalm 43:3-5. It goes like this. Relax, I'm not going to sing it.

Send out your light and truth, O God, and by your Spirit's skill,

Bring us into your dwelling place, unto your holy hill.

Then we will come and bow to you with great exceeding joy in you;

And at the altar of your grace lift melodies of praise.

You are the one true light, O God, illumining every one;



You are the light of truth to all, emancipation won.

Then why our faces all cast down with anxious hearts and worried frown?

Send your kind light our hearts to cheer and banish darkened fear.

“I am the Light of all”, he said, the light of all the world.

“You are the light”, the Savior said, the light to all the world.

Then set your light upon my hill so all the earth may see my will,

Your hearts with holy love aflame and gleaming with my Name.

O Holy God, O Christ, O Dove, the Trinity of Love.

O Lover, Loved and Love itself indwelling and above.

Let us abide in You this day and you abide in us, we pray;

Til praise be all we do or say, and all the world be one.