

Matthew 5:13-20 All people need the Light of the Gospel! Epiphany 5 February 5, 2017

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By God's grace and peace we have been called into the saving light through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. We're reading the Gospel lesson as our sermon text today from Matthew 5:13-20.

These are Your Words heavenly Father to give us true light in Christ. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear Christian Friends,

Every summer it happens to me. I'm outside the church or the parsonage and people stop to ask for directions. They are either looking for the other Trinity Lutheran Church in West Bend or their GPS has taken them in the wrong direction on Pleasant Valley Road. In either case they are thankful for the help, because, as we know, it can be frustrating and delay people from getting where they need to be. This can happen spiritually to people, too. Perhaps people grew up with a little knowledge of religion or they knew more but just lost it. Suddenly, they realized they need help or direction and they are not sure where to turn or how to get there. False religions like Mormons or Jehovah witnesses are actively offering to direct these people to a god that has no true Savior. Other Christian groups don't seem to care about people who are lost.

We don't want to be like those people. We want to be faithful Christians who actively hear and keep God's Word by faith in Jesus. Then, we pray God works through us to be guides for others to know truth.

All People Need the Light of the Gospel!

Using Jesus' illustration of light, the Bible makes it plain that **people in the world are in darkness**. Isaiah 60 states, "*Darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples....*" (v.2) It's like people are driving in a thick fog. It keeps them from seeing clearly even in daylight. Spiritually, darkness keeps people from seeing the danger ahead of them as sinners before a holy God. They don't realize that God's time of grace is coming to a close. Then, if they pass away without faith, they will face the judgment of God with no one to help them.

Another picture of darkness is that people are under the power of the devil, the prince of darkness. He is deceiving them to think that all is well. But, the Bible gives examples of warning. People outside the ark thought they were safe until the flood waters swept them away. The people at Sodom continued in their sins until the fire of God consumed them. In Jesus' parable of the wedding celebration, He described people who had no oil for their lamps. They were left out in the darkness where there would be eternal suffering.

The Bible describes these things so that people are warned to leave the darkness. But, none can change by themselves. For example, Jesus told His followers that they were "*the salt of the earth... the light of the world.*" (v.13-14) People by nature think that they must earn the position of salt or light. Jesus didn't tell them to earn it or make it a goal. He said, "You are the salt... and light." They were changed by the Holy Spirit through the word of Christ. Paul wrote, "*For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.*" (Ephesians 5:8) This is not a gradual change for people on their own; it is only as God works in us through His Word. That is what happened to Abraham in the Old Testament. God made promises to him and brought him to faith. Then Abraham lived by that word, influencing people around him for good.

So second, we have the light of His Word. When Jesus described His disciples as salt and light, He was saying they had the opportunity to be salt and light to others. Salt was used at Jesus' time to preserve meat and other foods. So today, Christians hold to God's Word and pray to keep people from gross and harmful sins, but also to make clear how all people must live or they will be condemned. Because of this truth, Christians are called hateful or intolerant of others living in sin. It's tempting to want to conform to the sinfulness around us; but that would be like salt losing its saltiness. We must remain like salt, holding to God's laws as the standard to which we strive to live. We cannot reject God's laws or His perfect will and think that all is well between God and us. That is not the faithful way to respond to God's love in Christ!

It is the same with light. By nature people want to hide sins they are committing. They don't want the light to expose when they are wrong. But, Jesus' makes it clear in vs. 17-18 that God's Word is not changed. Public opinion or bad laws in a country do not change God. What He declared as a sin long ago is still wrong today. Also, if God declared what is true 2000 years ago in His Word it is still true today. It will never change. We are to be light in that we speak God's truth in love. We won't cover the light of His truth because of opposition. Jesus tells us to have the light of God's Word to "give light to the whole house." Jesus also pictured a city on a hill. If you are walking along in the flat desert you can't miss a city built on a hill. The city is even more impressive when its lights are seen from miles away on a clear desert night.

So, we let the light of our faith in Christ shine by our words and actions. We speak the truth out of love for God and for others. We also show Christ's love in action. Jesus doesn't prescribe exactly how we are to show His love, but Paul describes fruits of faith as forgiveness, kindness, faithfulness, and gentleness. Our goal is not to call attention to ourselves. But, that all people see our loving God through us. Jesus said, "*that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*" (v. 16)

Third, we want all people to see that Jesus is just what they need. Jesus said, "*Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*" (v.20) Every Jew at Jesus' time looked up to the Pharisees as examples of the highest virtues. Pharisees and teachers of the law set the standard of right and wrong. But, Jesus said that their righteousness wasn't enough. It fell short in two ways. One, they didn't put God first. They valued their traditions more than God's laws. Second, when they followed the law of God it was in an outward matter and not a matter of the heart. God wants His followers to love Him with all their heart and mind and to love their neighbor as themselves. No person can live this kind of righteous life except for Jesus.

He said, "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*" (v.17) Jesus didn't just keep the letter of God's law; He kept the heart of it. First, He taught God's law in all its demanding fullness so that people saw it was impossible to be saved by keeping it. Yet, Jesus fulfilled the law by perfectly keeping it. It was the same with fulfilling all of the Prophets. Jesus kept every promise that they made. He was the true salt that stopped the decay of sin in our lives. He was God's light to show us the truth to be saved. He was the promised sacrifice that set us free from being slaves to the darkness of sin. He was the promised king who won the victory over the darkness of death by dying on the cross for us.

This is the message of God's grace that we are privileged to believe and to speak of as we hold up the light of the Gospel to our family and neighbors and to anyone. Isaiah wrote, "*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.*" (Isaiah 60:1) What a joy it is to know that by faith in Christ, we stand in God's saving light. We were once part of the darkness leading us to sin, but we want nothing more to do with it. Now we are light in the Lord. Jesus promised, "*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" (John 8:12)

So, the next time you help someone with direction let it remind you that God has put you where you are to also give spiritual direction. Knowing the Gospel of Christ, we know where we stand with God and where we are going. By our words and example we can help others see Jesus as their light so they may have His forgiveness and reach the best destination: eternal life with Christ. Amen.