

## Jesus: Light of the World

In preparation for this week's topic, I read quite a number of testimonies of people who were blind for all or most of their lives and who were given sight through a medical procedure of some sort. And what struck me about their stories was how difficult life became for them once they could see again. One man reported that people walking away from him looked like they were shrinking. Another had been a machinist before he regained his sight and found after the surgery that he preferred to identify his tools with his eyes closed -- there was too much to learn visually. Experiments have shown that people who receive sight later in life have difficulty identifying shapes, understanding drawings or perceiving dimensions of objects. One neurologist used the phrase "mentally blind" to describe a patient who became so confused after regaining his sight that he rapidly sank into depression and died only four months after his surgery.

Jesus healed blind people. In every gospel there is a story of Jesus healing someone who was blind and they are describing separate events of healing -- in different towns, under different circumstances. When Jesus began His public ministry, He announced to the people gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind.*

And Jesus proclaimed boldly that He was the light of the world -- John 8:12:

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, He said, "I am the light of the world.*

*Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

In a story that we looked at earlier, the healing of the man born blind in John 9, Jesus said, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (John 9:5)

Bringing light into the darkness of people's existence, whether they are physically or spiritually blind, may or may not be received. We don't hear of any negative reactions to Jesus healing people's physical blindness, but we do see a lot of negative reactions to His insights into -- and His corrections of -- spiritual blindness. Having lived for a long time in blindness, it is not easy to be a person who sees.

Let's begin with a careful reading of John 1:1-9:

*In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and He was God. He was in the beginning with God. He created everything there is. Nothing exists that He didn't make. Life itself was in Him, and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it.*

*God sent John the Baptist to tell everyone about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was only a witness to the light. The One who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was going to come into the world.*

This passage tells us a lot about Jesus, including that He is the Creator, that He is the living Word of God and that in Him is real life: "Life itself was in Him, and this life gives light to everyone." Out of real life, being truly alive to God, comes the light that can never be put out, the light that overpowers the darkness of this world. Jesus brought that kind of overpowering light into the world. His life, His presence, shone into the darkness around Him and there was no way that the darkness could overpower Him.

Some people welcomed that light, embraced it, were excited by its presence, and others found it too difficult to accept and so worked to extinguish it or to dull its effects. Jesus Himself described their reaction this way:

*There is no judgment awaiting those who trust (the Son of God). But those who do not trust Him have already been judged for not believing in the only Son of God. Their judgment is based on this fact: The light from heaven came into the world, but they loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. They hate the light because they want to sin in the darkness. They stay away from the light for fear their sins will be exposed and they will be punished. But those who do what is right come to the light gladly, so everyone can see that they are doing what God wants.*

This is pretty clear teaching and it's said again in various ways in the letters of the New Testament. Jesus is very "black-and-white" on the differences between Himself and the darkness of this world. His presence brings light, truth, wisdom from heaven and it challenges the world. People in the world have to decide what to do with this light from heaven, whether to accept its verdict that our deeds are sinful and we need to change, or to resist the light and try to hide from its influence.

But there's another challenge here as well: there are those who embrace the light, who accept that its message is true and good, and who yet find it very difficult to walk in that light. We were born blind and find that adjusting to "seeing" is hard work. Our thinking has to change, our habits have to change and that affects our interactions with people we may have known for years. But there's hope in Jesus' teachings about light and some real encouragement that we can be guided by the light from heaven and see the way clearly before us, and find His help along that way.

Step One: Jesus calls us to Himself. John 12:46:

*I have come as a light to shine in this dark world, so that all who put their trust in Me will no longer remain in the darkness.*

Verses 47 & 48:

*If anyone hears Me and doesn't obey Me, I am not his judge -- for I have come to save the world and not to judge it. But all who reject Me and My message will be judged at the day of judgment by the truth I have spoken.*

Jesus came so that people would put their trust in Him. The message from this passage is, "Don't reject Jesus. Don't be so defensive and self-righteous that you reject the One who brings light from heaven." If we can only start at the beginning, the place of faith and humility, where we agree with God that His judgments are just and

His ways are true, then we are embracing the light and allowing it to work in our lives.

Step Two: we learn to walk in the light. John 12:35,36:

*Jesus replied, "My light will shine out for you just a little while longer. Walk in it while you can, so you will not stumble when darkness falls. If you walk in the darkness, you cannot see where you are going. Believe in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light."*

Following Jesus has both an immediate and a trailing effect. As we follow Him, we are both walking in the light and learning to walk in the light when things get tough, when darkness shrouds our way, when Jesus' presence isn't as obvious to us. Jesus tells His listeners to walk in the light while they can, SO THAT they will not stumble when the darkness falls. Darkness will come: confusion, temptation, challenges to faith and to obedience, people who will offer to lead us in a different direction - away from the light of God's revelation in His Son. But if we've walked with Jesus, if we've listened for His voice and if we've obeyed His commands, then the darkness doesn't pose the threat it would otherwise.

We will not stumble, Jesus says, when the darkness falls. To me that means that there is something of the light of Christ that continues to guide us, continues to speak to us and reveal the way in which we should be walking.

Step Three: You are the light of the world. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, starting at v. 14, with Jesus speaking:

*You are the light of the world -- like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.*

The word that is here translated "your good deeds" is, in the original Greek, "your light". "Let your light shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."

Let's summarize what the gospels teach us about the light:

1. Jesus came into the world as a light comes into darkness and His presence gave people the opportunity to step out of the darkness and to begin to live in the light. This happens when we don't reject Jesus and His message, but instead choose to put our trust in Him.
2. Walking with Jesus, which means walking in simple trust, listening for His voice, doing what He asks of us; leads to us becoming children of the light. What we learn from Jesus enables us to keep walking even when we are surrounded by the darkness. We don't have to trip and stumble and feel our way, because Jesus shows us the way. His Spirit is in us and He will guide us.
3. Being guided by the Spirit, we are the light of the world. This means that we have a role in bringing light to others, in helping them find the way, which is, simply speaking, evangelism, sharing good news, introducing people to your best friend

and most powerful ally, Jesus, the Son of God.

There are two main applications to this teaching and I want to start on them early on. The first is that we have to accept that this contrast between light and darkness is, in fact, a true representation of the world we live in. Many will tell us that it is a picture of bigotry and intolerance, of the “I’m right and you’re wrong” kind of thinking that keeps people fighting with each other. But the same people who tell you that are guilty of the same thing. They believe that tolerance is, in a matter of speaking, the “right” thing and that teaching truth from a biblical perspective is a “wrong” thing. They just have a different set of rights and wrongs than we do.

There is a serious problem with tolerance as an absolute. If we truly believe that there is nothing really beautiful or true or good that is worth telling others about, that would benefit all of humanity, then tolerance is fine. If there’s nothing worth living for, nothing worth dying for, nothing worth sharing with our friends that is different than what they already know and do, then tolerance makes sense.

But the Christian faith doesn’t teach any of those things. The world assumes that everyone can make their own way in life and that each person’s “way” is equally valid and equally valuable in the long run. The Bible teaches the exact opposite. The Bible teaches that the human heart is deceptively wicked, that human beings are prone to sin and selfishness, that we tend to place a high value on things that are not valuable and that we are incapable of pleasing God or honouring Him appropriately. Some would call that a negative view and say we need to think more highly of ourselves. The Bible paints a more realistic picture of human weakness than the bright and cheery optimists of our day and tells us that we shouldn’t think of ourselves more highly than is appropriate, that we should walk humbly before our God, that God’s power is made perfect in our weakness.

Isaiah the prophet looked ahead 800 years and wrote:

*That time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will soon be humbled, but there will be a time in the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light -- a light that will shine on all who live in the land where death casts its shadow.*

He was writing about the coming of the Messiah who would bring light into the darkness. But if you’d talked to the Galileean-on-the-street in 28 A.D. and asked him if he was walking in darkness, do you think he’d even know? Do the people today who have no clue about Jesus think they are walking in darkness? Do they see their ignorance of Jesus or His message to be dangerous? No, but Jesus did. He said that people’s rejection of Him would be judged by the truth He spoke while He walked this earth. Again, there’s that word “truth” that goes along with the contrast between “light” and “darkness” and which tells us that tolerance is no virtue if it means an outright rejection of truth -- and that’s where the world is, right now.

Which brings me to the second application. The first is that we have to accept and gain confidence in the fact that there is good and evil, truth and falsehood, light and darkness. The second is that we need to acknowledge that Jesus was right when He said that we are the light of the world and that He was right when He said that we should not try to hide that light under a basket.

I heard a great story last weekend about a woman from Victoria named Kathryn. A while back, Kathryn was on a flight from Victoria to Edmonton. She was sitting next to a woman who complained of having a sore back and a stiff neck . . . she was uncomfortable, in pain. Kathryn thought that maybe she should offer to pray for the woman, thought maybe that God was actually asking her to pray for this woman, but she kept putting it off. Finally the plane landed and she probably thought that it was now too late; her opportunity had disappeared. Except that this was Edmonton and the doors of the plane had frozen shut. They would be waiting there for a little while, so Kathryn turned to the woman and asked if it would be alright if she prayed for her. The woman thought that would just fine and so Kathryn prayed. It was a short prayer, but the woman had obviously been touched by God and was moving her back and neck and was delighted that she had this new freedom from pain.

She was not a quiet woman and she was very excited about what she had just experienced, so it wasn't long before the woman in the seat behind tapped Kathryn on the shoulder and told her that she, too, was suffering from back pain and wondered if Kathryn would pray for her. Kathryn decided to ask the woman who had just been healed to pray and gave her some brief instructions on how to ask Jesus for healing. The result was wonderful, and soon two ladies were excitedly talking about the healing they had just experienced -- so loudly that anyone on the plane could have heard them.

Kathryn looked up to see, amongst those getting their bags out of the overhead compartments, another group of people making their way back towards where she was seated. Before the crews at the airport were able to open the doors, 8 people had received healing -- because one person knew that she had Jesus with her, that His light was shining through her.

There is so much potential in the Christian church today that is lying dormant because people in whom the Spirit of Jesus is living, forget that we are the light of the world! There is so much more that can happen if we remember that it's not all about us and how we're feeling or whether or not we feel awkward -- but we think about what it means for us to bring light into the world, to shine in the darkness, to expose what's evil, what's failing, what leads people to death ... and instead offer life, healing, hope, change, the promises of God.

Here's the deal again:

1. We trust in Jesus and begin to live in His light. We don't resist or reject His message and so we escape the judgment of the last days.
2. We live in the light of Jesus' presence, drawing near to Him at every opportunity,

seeking Him in prayer, in His Word, in obedience, in worship -- this makes us children of light who don't need to be confused or stumbled by the darkness that's in the world.

3. Because Jesus enters us by His Spirit in response to our faith in Him, we become light, the light of the world. Listen to how Paul puts this in Ephesians 5:

*You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.*

Living as children of light means living in submission to God's will for our lives, avoiding the works of darkness and embracing the call to godliness, to a life of love and service. It also means accepting our call to be the light of the world, of becoming more and more aware that we are light-bearers in the darkness and more and more willing to bring that light to bear on the situations we encounter.

It's an exciting challenge, and you can make it personal in the few minutes that lie ahead of us for discussion.