

**The Visible Expression Of The Kingdom Of God**

*Scripture: Matthew 5:14-16*

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.  
AMEN.**

Everybody's familiar with salt and light. They're found in virtually every home in the world. Jesus himself, as a boy in the Nazareth home, must often have watched his mother Mary use salt in the kitchen and light the lamps when the sun went down. He knew their practical usefulness. So these were the images which Jesus later used to illustrate the influence he expected his disciples to exert in human society. At that time they were very few in number...yet they were to be salt and light to the whole earth (John R.W. Stott, *Involvement: Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian World*).

"You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world", Jesus said. He implied that the church and the world are as radically different from one another as light from darkness and salt from what it seasoned cures. He also implied that, if the church is to do any good, the salt must soak into the meat, and the light must shine into the darkness. In other words, Christians must penetrate non-Christian society. The Church must be a visible expression of the Kingdom of God on earth.

John R.W. Stott, in his book, *Involvement: Being A Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society*, spells out four truths he finds in this passage of Scripture.

First, Christians are fundamentally different from non-Christians, or at least ought to be. The world lies in darkness, but you are light. God is calling us out from the world to be a people for himself. Christians are to be different. We're not simply good, law-abiding citizens of the United States. God has given the Church a purpose that neither the United States nor a political party nor a service organization nor a social agency can fulfill. The church and individual Christians are fundamentally different from non-Christians. As different as salt is from what it flavors, as different as light and darkness.

Secondly, Stott writes, Christians must permeate non-Christian society. We're to be morally and spiritually distinct from non-Christians, but we aren't to be socially segregated. We're to let our lights shine in the darkness. We're not to place it under a bushel basket. No! We're to let it shine. God wants strong, vital committed Christians to let their lights shine in the world and to become involved in the world, in the political parties, in labor unions, in government, in community organizations, in charitable organizations, in educational institutions and in social agencies.

IF you're involved in athletics God wants you to be a distinctively Christian athlete (Reggie White, Dave Dravecky, Gary Maddox). He wants cheerleaders and class officers who are distinctly and uniquely Christian, who let the light of Christ shine in their lives so that others will see their good works and glorify God. When I was in high school, Lloyd Wells was my hero. He was the starting fullback on our Blue Hen Conference Champion football team when I was a sophomore bench-warmer. He was a high-school All-American. But the thing that has made a lasting impression on me is remembering how Lloyd would bow his head in the high school cafeteria, surrounded with rough, tough fellow football players, and thank God quietly for his food. He was letting his light shine at some risk to himself and to his popularity because he wanted God to be glorified.

A third truth that Stott finds in the parable of the light is that Christians can and should influence non-Christian society. When a light is turned on, the darkness is actually dispelled. Jesus seems to have meant that Christians can dispel the darkness of evil in society. We can make a difference.

If our society is selfish and immoral whose fault is it? If the house is dark when the sun goes down, it's not the fault of the house because that's what happens when the sun goes down. If the world is dark, if there's darkness in this town we need to be asking, "Where's the light?" "Where's the church?" "Where's the Presbyterian Church?" Jesus told us that we are the light of the world so if there's darkness in Oxford or in the world it's because we're not letting our lights shine. Christians can and should influence non-Christian society.

A fourth truth that Stott finds in the parable of the light is that Christians must retain their Christian distinctness. If salt doesn't retain its saltiness, it's good for nothing. If light doesn't retain its brightness, it becomes ineffective.

Several years ago I heard Dr. Thomas Gillespie, the president of Princeton Seminary, say these words: "We are living in a time of danger for the Presbyterian Church because we Presbyterians are historically committed to engaging the culture in which we live, especially our intellectual culture. We have never been content to live the faith in an intellectual ghetto and because of our theological commitment to loving God with our mind as well as with the heart and the soul we have been, for the most part, unwilling to circle up the wagons and adopt a close-minded attitude mentality. That is all to our credit. But the reality is that those who engage the culture cannot help but be influenced by the culture, often profoundly. Thus our church, perhaps, more than others is today, unduly intimidated by the cultural mood which insists that truth is a matter of opinion and morality a matter of preference. The same loss of confidence in knowledge and righteousness which characterizes our culture all too characterizes our church as well."

In other words, the Presbyterian Church in general and individual Presbyterians who become involved in the culture are especially in danger of losing their Christian distinctiveness...in danger of our light becoming darkness; of our salt losing its saltiness.

There's little doubt that the most distinctive feature of our church before the fire was its steeple. There was no mistaking that it was a church. The steeple was like a beacon pointing to God. From as far as ten miles away people could see it. Children riding home from vacation with their parents would shout, "I can see the steeple!" and they'd know they'd soon be home.

God wants the church and its members to be distinctive and highly visible so that people might glorify God by believing and obeying the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. A highly visible beacon pointing people home to God. God wants us and our church to be involved in the world but not be of the world. God wants your neighbor and co-workers and fellow students to look at you and this church and see the light of Christ shining in our lives. The Christian faith is

not just a private affair between you and God. Our lives should be a visible expression of the kingdom of God in the world.

God wants you let your light shine, not only at work, at school, and in the community, but also in your home. I was interested to read last week that the most important factor in whether young people stay in or drop out of the church is whether or not one's family usually said grace or thanks to God before meals at home (C. Kirk Hadawag, *What Can We Do About Church dropouts?*, p.94).

I was amazed at this. Apparently, when young people see their parents praying before meals an impression is made that the Christian faith is not just a Sunday thing, but that their parents acknowledge that God is real and is the head of the home. Christianity is not just believing doctrines nor is it simply being a good person. It's a matter of a personal and community relationship with a personal God whom we know only through Jesus Christ and whose kingdom we long to make visible in the world.

Now notice why Jesus wants us to be highly visible. He does not want us to draw attention to ourselves and our own good works but to reflect the light of Christ. We're like the moon which shines only as it reflects the light of the sun. We have no natural capacity to shine. The light that shines in us is the light of Christ. It's God whom we want people to glorify and not ourselves or our church.

The Pharisees did good works in order to be seen by others. They wanted to be praised by others for their piety and religiosity. Jesus is not telling us to be Pharisees who draw attention to ourselves. Rather Jesus wants us to allow the light of Jesus Christ to shine in us so that people will glorify God. When people see us and our church we don't want them to say, "What a good Christian she is or what a nice, friendly church that is." Rather we hope they might look at us and say "Gods face is shining on that church. God must really be gracious, loving and powerful to love and save a person like that." We want God to be glorified, not ourselves.

The eyes of Oxford are upon us as we go about the rebuilding of our church. We're already physically highly visible. We're located in the center of town so that every car that drives through must drive past our building. Our members are involved in every aspect of the community. Hardly a week goes by that a member of our church is not pictures in the paper, as a student athlete or on the honor roll, or as a member of the Borough Council or School Board or Planning Commission or Historical Society or School Teacher or Business Leader or Volunteer Worker. We are already highly visible.

We're a city set upon a hill and the eyes of all the people are upon us. God has entered into a covenant with us, a solemn agreement between God and God's people. In that covenant God has promised to save us through Christ's death and resurrection. Our part in that covenant is to trust and obey Christ. And Christ has given us a distinct mission in the world: to preach the Gospel, to shelter, nurture and provide fellowship for the children of God, to maintain divine worship, to preserve the truth, to promote social righteousness and to be a visible expression of the fact that God rules and that Jesus Christ is alive.

God expects us to keep the covenant. God will strictly hold us accountable. If we provide fellowship, maintain worship and promote social righteousness but not preach the Gospel and preserve the truth God will hold us accountable.

The covenant as faithfully as God observes his side. WE, in short, are to construct a highly visible, model community, based upon what the Scriptures reveal of God's intentions for the world.

I'd like to close with the words of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in their book, *Resident Aliens*. "People often ask us, Is what you are saying liberal or conservative?...What we want to say is, We are neither liberal nor conservative. We are hopeful...Our project is to recover a sense of adventure by helping the church recover what it means to be a truthful people—a hope American liberals and conservatives have equally abandoned...The challenge facing the church is...the formation of a visible body of people who know the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay."

I can say, "Amen" to that. I hope you can to.

*Let us pray: Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world: Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and forever. Amen.*