

The Calling of Discipleship

Matthew 5:14-16

A lot of you have been asking about my okra patch, so I brought some action shots of my garden this morning. Here's a row of okra (scientific name is *abelmoschus esculentus*).



Here's a close-up of an okra flower and actual okra pods that actually make it to the table.



I tried something a bit different this year. Somebody brought me some used coffee grounds from Starbucks; you can pick it up on the way out the door and use it for mulch in your garden. I put coffee grounds around my okra this year. It took me a long time to figure it out, but we'd have fried okra for supper and I couldn't get to sleep that night. I'm just kidding . . .

Actually I really wanted to tell you about a tomato plant. Here is your basic Jet Star; it's about six-feet tall and is producing several dozen respectable tomatoes.



But here is another tomato plant that never really did much.



It is now living in the shadows of the okra. It's not much taller than the sweet basil. It's a great disappointment because I expected this tomato to be the biggest plant in the entire garden.

I bought this tomato because its name: Goliath.



This tomato plant never quite lived up to its name. It was never dangerous; it never towered over everybody else; it never even died a spectacular death. This tomato plant never lived up to its name.

Last week we began a sermon series on the topic of discipleship. Being a disciple of Jesus was never meant to be merely a name/title. It was *disappointing* to have a tomato plant named Goliath that only grew to be two feet tall and produced seven scrawny tomatoes. But it would be incredibly *tragic* if we bore the name “disciple” and didn't actually become like Jesus Christ – living the life that He lived and doing the works that He did.

If you are a disciple of Jesus, you have apprenticed yourself to Jesus and you have a standing commitment to learn from Him how to live your life. We even saw in Matthew 10 that a disciple is one who actually becomes like his/her teacher. When Jesus gave the command, “make disciples of all the nations,” he was saying that as we live as disciples, we bring others to the place where they too are apprenticed to Him. Jesus wants apprentices in every grouping of people on earth.

Today we are going to continue probing how essential it is for us to be disciples in order to fulfill our calling in this world. We are going to first look at one statement of Jesus' calling (John 9); then we are going to see how Jesus gave His disciple/apprentices this same calling (Matthew 5). I hope that we leave here today with a renewed conviction that we *have* to be more than disciples in name only. In order to live out our calling, we actually have to be disciples.

Jesus' Calling: "I am the light of the world." John 9:5, John 8:12, John 1:4-5

Let's turn to John 9 and consider a passage in which Jesus points to His calling and identity as the light of the world.

1 And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?"

The disciples' question exposes their assumption that a person's misfortune is probably caused by sin – either theirs or somebody close to them. They assumed that this man was born blind either because of some sin his parents had committed or because of some sin he would commit later in life. Even today it's pretty common for people to view their troubles as the consequence of some sin they've committed. Sometimes people think things like, "God is punishing me for something I did back in 2003." That *might* be the case, but the explanation of our circumstances is generally more complex than we could ever guess. In John 9, the disciples never could have guessed Jesus' explanation for the man being born blind:

3 Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

The man's blindness wasn't the consequence of his sin or his parents' sin. This man blind from birth so that God's power and compassion might be displayed through Him. If he hadn't been born blind, this man couldn't be given his sight as a display of God's might. Jesus' explanation introduces the possibility that we might experience troubles that have no earthly cause and effect explanation. Our troubles may simply provide an opportunity for God to rescue us and display His power and/or compassion.

Jesus goes on to explain that this "work of God" would come about through His (Jesus') work and the disciples' work:

4 "We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work.

Jesus includes His disciples in "working the works" of God the Father. Both Jesus *and* His disciples are to work as long as there is daylight (while Jesus is present). In verse 5 Jesus makes the following statement:

5 "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

This statement picks up a theme that runs throughout the gospel of John: when Jesus came into the world, He was "the Light that shines in the darkness" (1:5). As the "Light of the world" Jesus did at least a couple of things. First, as the Light, Jesus exposed the condition of people's hearts. Through Jesus' words and actions the searing light of God's truth shone on people. People had nowhere to hide when they were in the presence of the Light of the world. He exposed their sin, their brokenness, and their hypocrisy.

Second, as the light of the world, Jesus showed people a way out of their darkness. In 8:12 we read Jesus' pronouncement:

12 Again therefore Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life."

If you are a disciple of Jesus, you are following the light of the world and you therefore no longer have to walk in darkness. "Walking in darkness" – as you know – is a very dangerous thing. You crash into things; you fall down and hurt yourself; you run into others and hurt them. You don't necessarily intend to live such a destructive life; you can't help it if you're walking in darkness. It's not a very flattering image, but it's true: people without the Light of the world are walking in darkness.

Before I was following Jesus (especially my first couple of years in college), if you had told me that I was walking in darkness, I probably would have been offended. I considered myself a very competent person relationally and intellectually and even spiritually. But looking back at my life, I now realize that I was "walking in the darkness." I was living a rather self-destructive lifestyle. And relationally I was a walking disaster; I caused a lot of pain to others and to myself. And I was an all-around "great guy"! But I was walking in the darkness. The good news of the gospel is that by trusting in and following Jesus, you have the light of life. He shines the light on the path that leads to life – life in abundance. You now have spiritual awareness and direction. That's what I began to experience when I came to Christ.

Back to John 9 . . . The man who was blind from birth had lived his entire life in darkness – literal darkness. When he encountered the light of the world, this is what happened:

6 When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam " (which is translated, Sent). And so he went away and washed, and came back seeing.

Moving this man from blindness to sightedness would become a symbol for moving people from spiritual darkness to spiritual light. This healing was a sign that pointed to something deeper. At the end of the chapter Jesus is talking with this same man. When he came to understand who Jesus was, the man believed in Him and worshiped:

38 And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. 39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind."

Jesus' point is that every single person who admits his/her spiritual blindness will have their eyes opened. By contrast, those who think that they already "see" will remain spiritually blind (see verses 40-41). Jesus, as the Light of the World opens the eyes of those who are blind and know it; but His light is blinding to those who think that they already see.

Now turn with me to Matthew 5. We're going to see an amazing thing. Jesus healed a blind man and declared, "I am the light of the world," but in Matthew 5 Jesus says to His disciples, "You are the light of the world." I think it will become clear that we are meant to be more than disciples in name only; we are meant to do the very works that Jesus did.

Jesus' Disciples' Calling: "You are the light of the world." In Matthew 5 begins what we call the Sermon on the Mount. It's important to remember that Jesus is speaking explicitly to His disciples – those who were His apprentices in the Kingdom of God. In 5:14 we read:

14 You are the light of the world. . .

Jesus tells His disciples that we are supposed to bring light into the darkness. We aren't the light of the world in *exactly* the same way that Jesus is. By His very nature/essence He is the light of the world. We are the light of the world because we have Him – because He is within us and because we are progressively becoming like Him. We are the light of the world because we are apprenticed to Him and are therefore becoming more and more like Him!

Look at the rest of verse 14. Jesus seems to be emphasizing that our calling as the light of the world is an *obvious* thing. It's not something we try really hard to be once a week or once a month. No, we shine light into the darkness because we can't do anything else.

14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 15 nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.

Jesus is emphasizing that you cannot be apprenticed to Him and *not* shine as the light of the world. You might as well try to hide a city that is set on a hill. Jesus was saying that you might as well try to hide Jerusalem as keep His disciples from being the light of the world. That would be as unnatural and odd as lighting a lamp and putting it under a bucket. No, you light a lamp and put it on a lampstand to give light to everybody in the house.

If Jesus were standing here today, He would say to us: "You are the light of the world. Just like I brought the light into the darkness when I lived in Palestine in the first century, you are called to bring light into the darkness in Manhattan, Kansas in the 21st century." You and I both know people (and groups of people) who are living in spiritual darkness. Maybe you would have to say that you are living in darkness. That's not an insult; like the man blind from birth, we are all born in this darkness. Sometimes such a condition is evident to everybody; some peoples' lives are such an absolute disaster that everybody would say, "You are destroying yourself and everybody who gets close to you." Others hide their condition a bit better; on the outside they live decent, productive lives, they have good friends, and they are generally satisfied with their lives. But they are only experiencing a fraction of the life that God wants them to experience. They are living and walking in the darkness.

Jesus expects us to be the light of the world to such people. Jesus expects us to shine our light and show people a way out of their darkness. How do we do that? Verse 16 tells us:

16 Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Simply put, we live out our calling as the light of the world by our good works. The Sermon on the Mount itself explains many of those good works. When you bless those who curse you, you are shining the light in a dark place. When you notice needs around you and seek to meet those needs, you are shining light in a dark place. When you give to people expecting nothing in

return, you are shining your light. When you are merciful to people who don't deserve it, you are like your Father in heaven and you shine the light.

If you're like me, you probably don't think of yourself as the light of the world. You probably don't feel competent to shine light in dark places. That's okay. Let your incompetence drive you to Jesus. You don't have to feel competent; you just have to apprentice yourself to Jesus and He'll do the rest. Our calling as the light of the world isn't about our competence as disciples; it's about Jesus' competence as our Rabbi/Master Teacher. To reject our calling as the light of the world would be to reject Jesus as our Teacher.

Last week I made the point that if we want to *make* disciples, we have to *be* disciples. This week I want to make a similar point: in order to *live out our calling as the light of the world*, we have to be *apprenticed to Jesus who is the Light of the World*. If we aren't apprenticed to Jesus we may be able to do isolated, sporadic good works that shine the light, but we won't be able to shine as lights in the darkness (see Philippians 2:15, Ephesians 5:9). If we are apprenticed to Jesus, the Light of the World, *we won't be able to hide* that we are the light of the world. Many will hate the light, but many will flock to the light and find life in Jesus.

This has happened in different generations in different parts of the world. Let me give you an example from the 5th century. George Hunter III wrote a fascinating book about how St. Patrick and his companions were the "light of the world" to the Irish in the 5th century (*The Celtic Way of Evangelism*). You may have heard the story of Patrick before. Patrick lived in the northeast part of what is now England when he was captured by pirates as a boy and taken off to captivity in Ireland. He lived for many years in captivity. During that time his relationship with God deepened, he developed an appreciation for experiencing God through nature, and he cultivated a deep love for the Irish people (his captors). Eventually he escaped captivity and eventually went home and became a pastor in a church. At the age of 48 (past the life expectancy in that day) Patrick had a vision in which the people of Ireland called him, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us."

In 432 Patrick sailed to Ireland to attempt something that nobody in the church thought possible: reach the Celtic peoples for Christ. The Celts were considered "barbarians" and everybody knew that barbarians were unreachable. They were illiterate, they were emotional, and they were warriors. They ran into battle wearing nothing but sandals and a necklace, they sometimes decapitated their enemies, and they practiced human sacrifice. Nobody thought the Celts could be reached for Christ.

Patrick had at least a couple of things going for him. First, he had an intuitive understanding of the Celts. He had lived among them. He knew how they thought about life and death; he understood their love for nature, their values, their love of heroes, etc. Second, Patrick understood that *the church is the light of the world*. He actually believed that God had called the church to shine the light in dark places.

Patrick and ten or twelve others would set up a set up camp near a tribal settlement. And they began doing good works:

The . . . team would meet the people, engage them in conversation and in ministry, and look for people who appeared receptive. They would pray for sick people, and for

possessed people, and they would counsel people and mediate conflicts. On at least one occasion, Patrick blessed a river and prayed for the people to catch more fish. They would engage in some open-air speaking, probably employing parable, story, poetry, song, visual symbols, visual arts and, perhaps drama to engage the Celtic people's remarkable imaginations. Often, we think, Patrick would receive the people's questions and then speak to those questions collectively. (p. 21)

They engaged in this fascinating mix of conversation punctuated by good works. As people came to faith in Christ, they planted churches within each tribe that was distinctively appropriate for their culture. The results? Patrick's mission planted around 700 churches; between 30 and 40 of Ireland's 150 tribes became "substantially Christian" (p. 23).

It's an amazing story about Patrick's mission to the Irish. Why can't we have an amazing story also? Patrick and his companions were the light of the world to the Irish in the 5th century. Why can't we be the light of the world here in Manhattan, Kansas in the 21st century? Or do we think that the "barbarians" in our community are more unreachable than the barbarians in Patrick's day? I don't think they are.

Sometimes I think we don't seriously entertain the possibility that we might be used by God to bring people into the light because we can't figure out how it would happen. We can't figure out what to say and what to do. There is certainly place for strategy and for cultural exegesis; but that's not the main thing when it comes to our calling as the light of the world. The main thing is our discipleship - being apprenticed to Jesus who is the Light of the World. If we aren't apprenticed to Jesus we won't have the type of lives that will "shine like lights in this world." If we *are* apprenticed to Jesus we will become "like Him" and we won't be able to hide our light. We really won't.

Like the man born blind in Jesus' day, like the Celtic tribes in Patrick's day, many people in our day will be drawn to the light and will experience life. Many won't, but many will. And it all begins by us being apprenticed to Jesus.