

A Consistent Life
Matthew 5:14-16

A couple of weeks ago I got an email from a friend. He wanted some input on how to relate to his coworkers. He loves his job and the people he works with, but they're a very skeptical bunch. To them Christians are freaks or weirdoes or people to make fun of. As you know, there's plenty to make fun of My friend recently told a coworker about how he'd narrowly avoided a serious accident. His coworker's response was, "Wow, so you gunna to start going to church now after that miracle?" He was so taken aback by that comment that he didn't say, "As a matter of fact, I already do go to church. . ." He didn't know what to say, so he laughed along with his coworker.

That experience raises a significant issue that we need to think through carefully. How do we share the most important thing in our lives – our relationship with Jesus – with our friends and acquaintances? What is the foundational thing we can do to influence people who might otherwise be uninterested in the life Jesus has given us? Today we consider a passage that addresses this very issue: Matthew 5:14-16. In this passage Jesus speaks about "letting our light shine before others." I think we'll find Jesus' teaching very insightful and encouraging.

I realize that you may be here today thinking, "I'm that coworker/neighbor who's not sure about Christianity and whether or not it's for me." If that's the case, you will be listening in on a conversation that we believe is very important to have. What we're talking about isn't "insider information" that we would like to keep from others. What we're talking about today gets at the very heart of what Christianity is all about. And so I'm really glad that you're here today. Actually, I'd be very interested in any feedback or insights you might have on what I'll be sharing.

Last week we talked about how our relationships in the body of Christ are the foundation of our influence in the world. Jesus actually said that people could legitimately evaluate whether or not we are His disciples by whether or not we love each other. Since a disciple is a "learner/apprentice" and since one of the main things Jesus wants to teach us is how to love, then Jesus' comment makes sense. As we discussed last week, our love for each other is especially Christlike when we look past each others' sin and see what deeper things God is doing. When people see the love we have for each other, some will want the life that we have and some won't. But our love for each other is at the heart of our influence in the world. (BTW, if you want to hear that message, you can get the podcast off of our web site.)

Today we are going to take this biblical line of reasoning one step further and consider how we can intentionally let people see the way we live our lives. As a matter of fact, in Matthew 5:14 and 15 Jesus communicates how odd it would be for His followers NOT to let the people around them see how they live their lives. He's trying to impress upon His disciples that it would be positively strange if they didn't have a striking impact on the world around them.

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.

In the Old and New Testaments, light symbolized everything good: truth, purity, righteousness,

and the presence of God. Darkness symbolized everything bad: error, corruption, unrighteousness, and the absence of God. In the old covenant Israel was supposed to be a “light to the nations” so that they might understand what a relationship with God was like. God wasn’t merely interested in blessing a small group of tribes descended from Jacob/Israel (see Isaiah 49:6); He wanted all the nations of the earth to experience His salvation. God would draw them into such an experience through Israel. She was supposed to demonstrate and invite the nations into a relationship with God.

In saying that His disciples are the light of the world, Jesus is saying that we now fulfill the function that Israel had in the old covenant. In the new covenant, the church has the privilege and responsibility of demonstrating what a relationship with God looks like. People should look at our lives and our relationships with each other and see truth, purity, and the presence of God. Jesus didn’t ask if we’d like to be “the light of the world.” Whether we realize it or not, whether we want to be or not, ***we are the light of the world.***

Jesus gives a couple of illustrations that emphasize how strange it would be for us to cover up this light. First, Jesus said, “A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” In Israel in Jesus’ day the buildings of a city were typically made of white limestone. Such a city would draw attention to itself in the bright sunlight. Even at night lamps would shine through windows and draw attention to the city. Second, Jesus pointed out that nobody lights a lamp and then covers it up. Rather, it is elevated so that it can give light. That’s what lights are for.

The implication of these illustrations for Jesus’ disciples is given in verse 16:

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.

Just like it would be strange to turn on a lamp and then cover it up, it would be strange for Jesus’ followers to not let their light shine before others. The thing I love about Jesus’ teaching is that He is only telling us to be ourselves in front of others. He’s not asking us to project an image of something we’re not (as if that would somehow influence others!). The assumption is that we are living our lives honestly before God, progressively experiencing more truth, more purity, and more of God Himself. The assumption is that we are “zealous for good works” (to use Paul’s terminology in Titus 2:14).

As we live that type of life, we need to avoid being self-conscious and overly concerned about what people think about us. We need to avoid the tendency to be one type of person around our Christian friends and another type of person around others. Jesus wants us to ***live a consistent life*** no matter who we’re around. Jesus wants us to have the freedom to be ourselves no matter what we’re doing and who is watching. Of course there should be a type of fellowship (commonality) among believers that doesn’t exist with others. But we shouldn’t shut down the way we think and talk and act as believers when we’re around others. And we shouldn’t hide from others the rest of our life with Christ.

Jesus holds out the prospect that as we let our light shine, some will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. In other words, some will find our lives so compelling that they too want what we are experiencing. They will enter into a relationship with God and begin to glorify Him (showing others just how compassionate, just, gracious, true, etc. He is).

Others, by contrast will respond to us just like some people responded to Jesus. On numerous occasions Jesus reminded His disciples that no slave is greater than his master; if people persecuted Jesus, surely they would persecute the followers of Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus said, it's worth it:

10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Not everybody will love the light we shine; some will hate it. But the prospect that *some* will be drawn to Christ as let them see our lives keeps persecution in perspective.

One word of qualification before we talk about application Some of you might be wondering how the idea of letting our light shine before others so that they might "see our good works" squares with Jesus' teaching in the next chapter. In Matthew 6 Jesus launched into an extended discussion of how we should practice our acts of righteousness in secret.

6:1 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

It's really a matter of motives. Here in chapter 6 Jesus is warning about doing acts of righteousness (such as prayer, giving, and fasting) *for the purpose of* being noticed by other people, for the purpose of making yourself look good. Jesus says that if your goal is to get other people to be impressed with you, and somehow you manage to pull it off (e.g., they are impressed by the fact that you go without food for a day), that's your reward in full. Others may be impressed, but not God.

The whole motivation is different back in 5:16 where Jesus said to let your light shine so that others might see your good works. There you're not doing acts of righteous so that others might notice you; you're doing acts of righteousness because they reflect the "right" way to live your life. You let people see your good works *not* so that *you* will look good, but so that God would look good – so that they "might *glorify Your Father in heaven.*" The idea is that others would look at your good deeds and be drawn to God and the life that He gives us in Christ. And so the whole motivation is different.

At the first of the message I mentioned my friend who was trying to figure out how to let his light shine before his coworkers. He had a hard time even telling them that he goes to church. Well, this summer my friend and his wife have a youth ministry intern staying at their house. A friend from work asked who she was and why she was straying with them. My friend was able to share that she was working at their church this summer, etc. Contrary to what he expected, they were interested in his church; he said that his relationship with his coworkers has actually deepened as a result of such conversations. The thing that struck him was how very little they knew about the Christian faith and the church. He is almost their only link to Christ right now. Having that role in their lives is a great privilege.

What are some ways that we might “let our light shine” before others? What does this look like in everyday life? I’ll share a few examples/ideas, but this will look different for different people. Our circumstances are different, our temperaments are different, and our giftings are different.

Consider the corporate element of letting our light shine. There is a corporate element to Jesus’ command, “Let your light shine.” We talked about this some last week. Jesus assumed that His followers wouldn’t be segregated off somewhere away from the eyes of the world in their own little closed community. He assumed that our common life together would be accessible and observable to people who need a relationship with God. Otherwise He never would have said that people would know we’re His disciples when we love each other as He loved us. He assumed that people would be close enough to observe our relationships with each other.

I don’t have any easy answers here, but it seems to me that we need to find ways to include other in our lives. Instead of drawing a line between Christian friends and everybody else, it makes sense that we would look for ways to invite people into our relationships and into our lives – meals, entertainment, down-time, etc. Of course, this will never happen unless our relationships with each other are what they should be (i.e., Christ-like). Honestly, if we’re embarrassed by our church or our relationships with each other, we certainly won’t invite others in. If we aren’t experiencing the type of relationships that we’re convinced EVERYBODY needs, then we shouldn’t invite others in. As we said last week, the solution is not some PR campaign; the solution is to be more Christlike in our love for each other. There are no short-cuts here.

One of the reason we run the Alpha course three times a year is because we want to have an ongoing, regular way to invite people into our midst and into our lives. We provide invitations you can hand to someone and say, “I’d like you to take a 10-week course about Christianity with me. A meal is provided, then we watch a talk on the screen, then we talk about it.” When people come, they experience Christian hospitality and fellowship with no strings attached. Alpha provides a context where we can simply be ourselves to the glory of God with friends and coworkers and neighbors.

Don’t be afraid to share your struggles. Don’t feel like you need to share a bunch of “success stories” with people. Remember that people don’t need to see perfection; they need to see redemption. Shining your light might involve letting someone see how you’re struggling through a situation but that you’re handling it by faith. A neighbor might ask, “How’s your work going?” Your answer to that question might be an opportunity for you to pull back the curtain a bit and let him/her see how you as a follower of Christ are handling a difficult situation.

Remember that Jesus wasn’t accused of being “friendly” with tax-gatherers and sinners; He was accused of being *a friend* of tax-gatherers and sinners. They experienced the familiarity and affection that comes from a friend. If we are Christlike, we will do the same thing. We will seek to develop honest, authentic friendships with people – both inside and outside the body of Christ. With friends we pull back the curtain a bit and let them see our lives. That will involve letting them see how we – as followers of Christ – deal with pain and disappointment in our lives. Again, the prerequisite is that we are actually trusting God and dealing honestly with the issues of our lives. If that’s the case, we’ll have plenty to share with others.

A Training Opportunity. You might be thinking, “That sounds good in theory, but in reality

I'm not very good at developing such friendships and being myself to the glory of God." I want to mention a training opportunity that you might want to take advantage of. In a couple of weeks we are hosting a seminar taught by Kirk Wulff, director of *Alpha* at Christ Church Anglican, Overland Park, called "Counting Conversations, Not Conversions." I actually attended this seminar last summer in KC. The seminar emphasizes the same things we've been talking about today: living a consistent life and being yourself around people who need to know Christ as you do. It will talk about how to "let your light shine" in very natural ways. It's on Sunday night, July 27th from 5 to 8:30. Detail can be found on the flyer in the bulletin.

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. 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.