

Loving the Church
Reaching People for Christ
John 9, Matthew 5

This is the second of three sermons on “Loving the Church.” Last week we considered the account in John 2 in which Jesus “cleansed the temple.” He was so zealous for pure, uncluttered worship that He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and made a whip to drive out the people and the livestock from the court of the Gentiles. Cleansing the temple proved that He was zealous about pure worship in His day. And dying on the cross in order to give us full entrance into the presence of God proved that He was passionate about the worship of all people everywhere in every generation.

Local churches exist to help people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation worship God in this way. This week and next we are going to discuss how the local church is uniquely suited to help people come to faith in Christ and to help people mature in Christ.

Our simple idea today is this: ***We love the local church because it is uniquely suited to leading people to Christ.*** This capacity to lead people to Christ is wrapped up in our identity as “disciples of Jesus.” It’s not something optional or an add-on. It’s inherent in our calling as disciples – or apprentices – of Jesus Christ. We are first going to look at the way that Jesus described His own calling (“I am the light of the world” – John 9) and then we are going to see how Jesus gave His disciple/apprentices this same calling (“You are the light of the world” – Matthew 5). I think it will be obvious that before we can ***make*** disciples we 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 sometime during his life. Even today it’s pretty common for people to view their troubles as the consequence of some sin they’ve committed: “God is probably punishing me for something I did back in 2003 . . . or last Thursday night. . . or . . .” That ***might*** be the case, but the explanation of our circumstances is usually much 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 was 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’ words and actions exposed the condition of people’s hearts. 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 . . . and sometimes even their faith.

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.

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 metaphor 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 be confirmed in their spiritual blindness (see verses 40-41). Jesus, as the Light of the World, opens the eyes of those who know they are blind; but His light is blinding to those who think that they already see. This is the effect that Jesus had upon people simply because of who He was, because of His identity.

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."

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, "You are supposed to shine 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 apprenticed to Him (and are therefore becoming more and more like Him)!

I want us to think about the *corporate* nature of this command. Sometimes we tend (in America anyway) to apply a text like this individualistically. But Jesus was speaking to the community of disciples. The NT is rather consistent in the view that no single believer can represent Jesus as comprehensively as a community of believers. That's why Paul developed the image of the "body of Christ" – corporately we are His body, doing the very things that He'd do if He were still bodily here. Paul likened individual believers to hands and feet and eyes and ears. It's arrogant and misguided to think that any single member of the body can do everything. Understanding (and actually believing) this has been one of the most liberating truths I've come across in relation to the church. Instead of *lamenting* that everybody isn't the same (flaming extroverts with speaking gifts), we should *celebrate* that everybody isn't the same.

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 do/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 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, I believe He would say to us (and to every local church in our city): “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. If you are apprenticed to Me, this will be the obvious fruit of your lives.” 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 – quite often corporately. 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 because 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. 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.

I promised you that I would give examples from India and the Arabian Peninsula in these messages on loving the church. One of the people we came to know and love in India is a woman from Australia named Kate. She is involved in a church that has an ongoing ministry presence in a slum in Delhi in which they “couple action with proclamation.” I’d like to show you a video that describes one aspect of this work – how they are living out their calling as the light of the world.

[You can view this video at <http://www.vimeo.com/12246105> .]

Kate mentioned to us in an email that they began a Home Group in the slum in 2010. Fourteen families from their church committed themselves to pouring into the lives of fourteen families from the slum. Kate writes, “We had a healing in the slum last year, & Sudha, one of the women, has seen multiple answers to prayer: her alcoholic husband who drinks much less & subsequently beats her less, as well as seeing the water pump outside her home restored twice after being cursed.” This is an expression of their calling and identity as “the light of the world” – they shine the light of Jesus as a way of life.

I want to mention *a few things that we are doing here at Faith* to encourage this calling as the light of the world. These are simple ways that we do good works in our everyday life. One of the things that struck me in India and the Arabian Peninsula was that these are the same things our people over there are doing.

We urge you to enter into *honest friendships* with the people already in your life – family, friends, co-workers, customers, neighbors. Jesus wasn't merely "friendly" to tax-collectors and sinners; He was accused of being the friend of tax-gatherers and sinners. There's a vast difference between the two. . . We want people to actually befriend people who are far from God. Seriously, how are people going to have an accurate view of life in the Kingdom if they aren't in honest relationships with genuine believers?

For years we've heard our missionaries talk about spending years (not minutes or hours) cultivating relationships with people who need Christ. In India we met a guy from the States who's been serving there for 20 years. The last few years he and his team have begun to see a small trickle of people come to Christ. After 20 years of cultivating honest relationships they're seeing a few people come to Christ. He was very eager to impress upon me that he's a very ordinary person who is simply following Jesus. His comment was, "I'm just a Hobbit carrying a ring. . ." (That's a Lord of the Rings allusion. . . an ordinary guy who's been given a mission.)

We teach "Just Walk across the Room" – a course about initiating honest relationships with people who are already in your life. One of the reasons I love the church is because it provides a context through which EVERY believer can be part of what God is doing in this world. – not merely a few people who happen to be especially gifted or motivated. It begins with friendships.

We talk about *experiencing God in all of life* – expanding our concept of discipleship so that we might "shine our light" in every area of our lives. For example, we encourage you to "do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men. . ." (Colossians 3:23). Your work is the "main thing" you do whether you get paid for it or not. If you're a student, your studies are your work. If you're a stay-at-home-mom, your parenting is your work. We assume that many of the "good works that God has prepared beforehand" (Ephesians 2:10) will happen in the context of your "work." It would be strange if this weren't the case. If you do your work "for the Lord" your light will shine and people will notice.

This is especially important if you're working around people who are far from God. No doubt they will eventually know that you're a follower of Christ. You need to do your work in a way that shows off just how powerful a relationship with God really is. If they don't respect you (how you treat people, how you do your work, etc.), they probably won't be drawn to explore your faith. Both in India and the Arabian Peninsula we met believers who teach in high schools and universities. Their work is their primary connection with people in those cultures. They have a good reputation among faculty and students. That's the primary way that they live out their calling as the light of the world.

Steve and Ellen's children are in an international school in NOIDA (outside of Delhi). In December Ellen was invited to come to Anjali's class to talk about Christmas. Ellen asked the class, "Who can tell me whose birthday is celebrated on Christmas?" One little girl who'd

grown up in a western country raised her hand and said “Santa Claus,” but nobody else had any ideas. Ellen was able to share about Jesus. That’s using a normal opportunity to talk about why Jesus came.

We encourage you to *invite friends into the life of the church*. You are really free to invite people to participate in any gathering here at Faith – life groups, music nights, celebrations, worship, etc. It’s vital for people to see what the Christian life is all about. I came to faith in Christ after seeing how Christians treat each other and after hearing how they talk about their relationship with Jesus. Many times people “belong” before they “believe.”

This is why we offer the Alpha course, a ten-week course on Christianity. Alpha gives people an opportunity to spend time around real, live Christians. They can have honest conversations about Christianity. They can see how Christians talk and act (in contrast to the caricature they see on TV). They can see if the Christian life is better than the life they’re living. Honestly, if the Christian life isn’t superior to the other options out there, it’s unadvisable to become a Christian.

We met a couple who lives in Bangalore, India whose church is running an Alpha course. They’re school teachers, but their church provides this ongoing opportunity to invite friends into their fellowship. Alpha is just one tool that God uses. But one of the reasons He uses Alpha is because it provides a venue for the body of Christ to live out its identity corporately.

There is a role for every single one of us to play in helping people come to Christ. In Alpha and in the other ministries of Faith, there is a need for people with all different gifts and strengths – hospitality, service, prayer, leadership, pastor/shepherd, administration, etc. This is a tangible expression of the variety of gifts in the body of Christ. If you ever become convinced experientially that you have a role to play in helping people come to Christ, you’ll never be the same.

Actually, by the grace and power of God, we envision the day when everyone of us at Faith will be able to look across the room on a Sunday morning and see at least one person we’ve helped lead to Christ (through befriending, serving in some way, sharing the message, providing hospitality, or praying for, etc.). This isn’t something we *have* to do; this is something we *get* to do. This is something we want to do because we love people. This is one more reason why we love the church: because Jesus uses us to help people find life and wholeness in God.