

Sermon – February 5, 2023  
“Shining Lights”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 5:13-20

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit us today, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people allowing continued transformation into Christ's image and leading us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen*

Good morning! I want to thank everyone for the birthday cards and wishes as I celebrated my birthday this past week. I am so looking forward to getting all of those senior citizen discounts that come with being a more mature person. Good News Club at the Northumberland elementary school continues and we would love to have you pray for us while we are working with the children. This Thursday evening, we will hold the next Healing Prayer service at Fairfields. Please come and be part of a time when we ask Jesus to touch our brokenness and bring healing in our lives.

We are moving forward in Matthew's Gospel into the deeper waters of Jesus' teaching. I would like to speak this morning to the idea of our becoming a light to the world. Jesus' words about salt and our presence bringing salt to the places we are sent by God are an example of Jesus teaching us to bring something new into the relationships we have in our community. Light is another example. Light is tied to many scripture passages that refer to God and Jesus as light. We, as Jesus' followers, are also to have this characteristic of being a light shining into the

darkness of the community where we live. I was reminded this week of Jesus walking with two disciples to Emmaus and how they described their hearts as burning within them as Jesus opened the scriptures to them as they walked. When I think of burning, it brings light to my mind. Our hearts are to be a burning fire with God's word, and the light from that fire within is to send out light into the darkness. We are to be those who are encountering Jesus in the word of God, and as we encounter him, our hearts burn within us and we give off the pure light of God as we do good works in dark places that give glory to our Father in heaven. Jesus tells us that we do not hide a light under a basket but put it on a lampstand so that its light might shine for all to see and benefit from the removal of darkness. We are not to be sources of light only to each other within the walls of the church building, but are to be sources of light to people in our community. The lights we are to be for Christ are to be outside the walls of the church and seen as works that give glory to God the Father. We come into the church to hear the word of God, to be refilled with the source of light in our lives, Jesus Christ, and then we are to go out into Jesus' mission with him by engaging in good works that give glory to God and not to ourselves. Think of ourselves as those who go forth bearing light into the darkness of our community and all of the places Jesus asks us to go with him. We should see ourselves as Christ followers who are not called to come to church on a Sunday morning to let our light shine among other believers and to grow in "private personal holiness."<sup>i</sup> We are to be those whose focus all week is to be lights of Christ shining into the darkness of the world. We are to follow Jesus as fishermen who are out in the world working with Jesus and casting nets of love into the dark waters so that people might be caught in them and brought into the kingdom of God.

The Pharisees and Sadducees represent those who are seeking righteousness by strict keeping of the Law through their interpretation of the Law. The reference to the Law here is a reference to the Old Testament scriptures that document the Law given to God's people. Jesus is accused of abolishing this Law through his healing on the Sabbath and other actions that are being carefully scrutinized by the keepers and enforcers of the Law. Jesus speaks to this idea in his teaching, telling those listening, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."<sup>ii</sup> Where the Pharisees and Sadducees have worked to live by their understanding of all of the Law and to interpret the Law into definitive actions which they seek to live under, Jesus' disciples will now need to listen to Jesus' teaching and discern from what he teaches how to apply Jesus' teaching to the keeping of the Law of the

Old Testament.<sup>iii</sup> The Old Testament Law pointed to the coming of Jesus. With Jesus' arrival, the Law will now need to be reinterpreted through Jesus' teaching and life that fulfill all of the Law. Notice Jesus does not limit the scripture he fulfills to the Law of the Old Testament but includes the prophets. By including the prophets in his definition of scripture, Jesus includes all the Old Testament scriptures in what he has come to fulfill. Jesus' focus on the Law is not on law keeping but living life in a manner that honors God. The Law and the prophets testify about and point to Jesus' coming into the world and he has now arrived and is at work fulfilling the scriptures. The Law remains the authoritative word of God. Jesus' life and teaching open our understanding of the Law, giving us a complete revelation of how to apply the Law and prophets in light of Jesus, the Son of God, coming to earth in the flesh. Our task becomes not following the Law in a legalistic manner but discerning how to live lives that honor God in light of the arrival of Jesus Christ, a process that becomes the hard work each believer is to be about. In response to Jesus, we need to open our Bibles, read the Law and prophets, and discern how Jesus fulfills the Law. We are to learn how he teaches us to live in light of fulfillment and how those in the kingdom of God are to live in light of Jesus' life and teaching. Our focus for Law keeping becomes seeking to live lives that fully honor God as Jesus teaches while learning to live in the light of grace.

Let me provide an example of what is meant by the idea of Jesus fulfilling the Law. In the Old Testament we will find a section of the Law describing a very complex system of sacrifice for atonement of sin. These laws identify sin and the need for the shedding of blood and death to make an atonement for sin. These laws outline the temple sacrificial system and also point to the coming of one who will fulfill these laws not with the blood of animals, but with the blood of Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. With the coming of Jesus and his atonement on the cross for our sin, these laws have been fulfilled and there is no longer a need for temple sacrifices. The sacrificial aspects of the Law are now fulfilled through Jesus' shed blood and death on the cross. Our sin debt has been paid in full by the shed blood and death of Jesus Christ. Yet the idea of sin, a penalty for sin, and a necessary payment to remove sin found in the laws of the sacrificial system remain in place. We now have grace through Jesus Christ and his work on the cross. The laws that relate to sacrifice have been fulfilled by Jesus. They are not set aside but have been fulfilled. They no longer require a yearly animal sacrifice for forgiveness of sin because Jesus has fulfilled that requirement, bringing not

only forgiveness but power to transform our hearts to live lives that honor God. Jesus Christ has come and the kingdom of God is breaking in. Jesus has fulfilled the Law, yet all of the Law remains in place until heaven and earth pass away. In other words, the identification of sin by the Law and a need for its atonement is an eternal aspect of the Law. Fulfillment of the sacrificial laws for forgiveness of sin is an example of what Jesus means when he teaches that he does not abolish the law but fulfills it. As followers of Christ, we now need to learn to discern Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and how his fulfillment guides us in light of his teaching to become in our daily lives those who live in a manner that honors God. Those who have turned to Christ, who believe in him, are those in the kingdom of heaven. Disciples of Christ are then transformed from within into a people who are able to live the Law as God intended it to be lived. We are those whose lives are transformed and are not to be those seeking to legalistically follow the Law, (think Pharisee). Instead, we have been transformed into those who have the characteristics Jesus teaches within our hearts and we are able to keep the fulfilled Law through the empowering of Holy Spirit. As followers of Christ, we study the Law and Jesus' teaching seeking to discern how they apply to us today in light of their fulfillment by Jesus. Those who do this are the salty Christians sent out into the world as shining lights. They go out not as those who adhere to the letter of the Law but those who go out with hearts transformed, enabling them to live in the world in a manner that honors God and brings salt and light into the world through the works they are now part of that give God glory. They are not going out as shining lights to point out the sins of the world but are going out to dispel darkness by becoming a reflection of the light of Jesus Christ in the darkness of the world.

Don't miss that Jesus does not set aside any of the Law. Even the smallest part, the jot and tittle, is still part of the Law that Jesus fulfills and that remains until heaven and earth pass away. Heaven and earth passing away is another way of saying for all eternity. That Jesus speaks to even the smallest aspect of the Law tells us that the Old Testament laws are not a set of complex rules of conduct that we must know by heart and strive to keep. They become pointers to a new and greater righteousness that leaps out of the old bounds of Law keeping and brings those who enter the kingdom of heaven into a new righteous manner of living. It means that we don't need to be as focused on memorizing even the Ten Commandments (as helpful as that knowledge is) but through Jesus' fulfillment, we have a new approach to righteousness through living out Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and the prophets.

Let me point out an aspect of Jesus' teaching about the Law. He says, "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>iv</sup> Notice Jesus does not disqualify those who break even the least of the commandments and teach others to do so from the kingdom of heaven. Those who break the commandments and teach others to do the same are the least in the kingdom of heaven, but they are in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus has opened the door of grace, and those who enter into the kingdom of heaven through his fulfillment of the Law, even if they fail to keep one of the least of the commandments, are still citizens of the kingdom. There is grace in this kingdom. The greatest in this in-breaking kingdom are those who are keeping and teaching others to be keepers of these commandments. Notice that Jesus then speaks to the Pharisees' and Sadducees' approach of keeping all of the unfulfilled Law through their complex interpretation of law keeping. Jesus teaches that the righteousness they achieve with their meticulous keeping of laws is inadequate to gain entry into the kingdom of heaven. Those in the kingdom, those who desire to be in the kingdom of heaven, must have more righteousness than those who seek to keep the Old Testament Law will achieve. We cannot work our way into the kingdom of heaven. We are brought into the kingdom of heaven through Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and the grace and inward heart transformation that he extends to us through that fulfillment. Once in the kingdom of heaven, we will be those with transformed hearts who shine the light of Jesus into the dark places of the world with works as we join Jesus in his mission to all people.

*Pray with me: Lord, we want to be shining lights for you. Lord, open our eyes to see the needs of this community. Open our hearts to be transformed into those who are journeying with you into your mission and are being transformed within to those who are salt and light for you, those who will hear your call and act right here, right now. Holy Spirit, come and change us, fill us, free us, guide us to be those whose love is seen in our community and whose works are praises to God on the lips of those we serve. Amen*

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<sup>i</sup> France

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV Matthew 13:17

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<sup>iii</sup> France, R. T.. The Gospel of Matthew (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) (p. 183). Eerdmans. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iv</sup> NRSV ...13:19