

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

A Study of Matthew 5:14–16 and Its Message for the Contemporary Church

1. Introduction

Few sayings of Jesus are as familiar to Christians as His words, “Let your light so shine before men.” They are sung in children’s choruses, printed on church banners and quoted in sermons across the world. Yet familiar words can easily lose their force. A text that is quoted often may be understood rarely. Before we ask what these words mean for the church today, we must first ask what they meant to the people who heard them from the lips of Jesus and to the first readers of Matthew’s Gospel.

This paper therefore follows a simple method. It first examines the historical setting and the original audience of Matthew 5:14–16. It then explains the meaning of the passage in its context. After this, it considers why Christians must let their light shine, looks briefly at the witness of the church in history, and asks honestly whether the church today is shining as it should, and if not, what has gone wrong. Finally, it suggests practical ways in which the contemporary church, especially in Nigeria, can recover its calling to be the light of the world.

2. The Text

The passage reads as follows in the King James Version:

“Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14–16)

These verses come immediately after the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12) and the saying about salt (5:13). Together, the images of salt and light describe the influence that the followers of Jesus are meant to have on the world around them.

3. The Historical Setting and the Original Audience

3.1 The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew tells us that Jesus saw the crowds, went up on a mountain and sat down, and that His disciples came to Him (Matthew 5:1). The teaching was addressed directly to the disciples, but the crowds were listening as well (7:28–29). The setting was Galilee in the early first century. The people were mainly Jewish villagers, farmers and fishermen. Many were poor. They lived under the rule of Herod Antipas, who in turn was under the authority of Rome. They paid heavy taxes, and many of them longed for God to act, to deliver Israel and to establish His kingdom.

It is important to notice who these first disciples were. They were not powerful or famous people. They were fishermen, a tax collector and ordinary men and women from small towns. In the eyes of the world they were insignificant. Yet Jesus looked at this small and humble group and said, “You are the light of the world.” This was a startling statement. It meant that God’s purpose for the whole world would be carried forward, not by Rome or by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, but by this little community gathered around Jesus.

3.2 Light in the Jewish Scriptures

The first hearers would have understood the image of light against the background of the Old Testament. God Himself is described as light and as the source of light (Psalm 27:1; Psalm 36:9). His word is a lamp to the feet and a light to the path (Psalm 119:105). Most importantly, Israel was called to be a light to the nations. Through the prophet Isaiah, God said of His Servant, “I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6; see also 42:6). Isaiah also foresaw a day when the nations would come to the light of Zion: “Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee” (Isaiah 60:1–3).

Jewish teachers sometimes spoke of Israel, Jerusalem or the Law as the light of the world. When Jesus said to His disciples, “You are the light of the world,” He was therefore making a bold claim. He was saying that the calling once given to Israel was now being fulfilled in the community of His followers. Matthew had already quoted Isaiah 9:1–2 to

show that in Jesus “the people which sat in darkness saw great light” (Matthew 4:16). Now Jesus passes that light on to His disciples.

3.3 Everyday Images from Village Life

Jesus used pictures that His hearers knew well. The “city that is set on an hill” would have been easy to imagine, because many towns in Galilee and Judea were built on hilltops for safety. At night, the lamps of such a town could be seen from far away. A city in that position simply cannot be hidden.

The second picture comes from the home. Most ordinary houses in Galilee had only one main room. A small clay oil lamp was placed on a lampstand so that it could give light to everyone in the house. The “bushel” was a measuring bowl used for grain. To put a lamp under such a bowl would be foolish, because it would hide the light and could even put it out. No sensible person lights a lamp in order to cover it. In the same way, it is against the very nature of a disciple to hide the light that God has given.

3.4 Matthew’s First Readers

Matthew’s Gospel was probably written some decades after the ministry of Jesus, for a community that included many Jewish believers and a growing number of Gentiles. These Christians faced misunderstanding and opposition, both from some synagogue leaders and from the wider society. The Beatitudes had just warned that disciples would be persecuted, insulted and falsely accused for the sake of Jesus (Matthew 5:10–12). In such a situation it would have been tempting for believers to withdraw, to keep quiet and to hide their faith in order to stay safe. The words about light directly challenged that temptation. The church was not to retreat into a hidden corner but to live openly as the people of God, so that its life would point others to the Father.

4. The Meaning of the Passage

4.1 An Identity Before a Duty

Jesus does not say, “Try to become light,” or “One day you will be light.” He says, “You are the light of the world.” The statement describes who disciples already are because

of their relationship with Him. The command in verse 16 grows out of this identity. Because they are light, they must let their light shine. The “you” is also plural. Jesus is speaking to the community of disciples together, not only to individuals. The church as a whole is meant to be like a city on a hill, a visible community whose shared life displays the character of God.

4.2 The Source of the Light

The light that believers carry is not their own. Elsewhere Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). The disciples are light only because they are joined to Him, just as the moon gives light only by reflecting the sun. Paul says that believers were once darkness but are now “light in the Lord” (Ephesians 5:8), and that they shine “as lights in the world” in the middle of a crooked generation (Philippians 2:15). Christian light is therefore reflected light. It shines brightest when believers stay closest to Christ.

4.3 Good Works as the Shape of the Light

Jesus explains that the light is seen in “good works.” The rest of the Sermon on the Mount shows what these works look like: a righteousness deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), reconciliation instead of anger (5:21–26), faithfulness in marriage (5:27–32), honest speech (5:33–37), love for enemies (5:43–48), generosity, prayer and trust in God (6:1–34). Good works are not simply religious activities. They are a whole way of life marked by justice, mercy, purity and love.

4.4 The Purpose: Glory to the Father

The goal of letting the light shine is that people “may glorify your Father which is in heaven.” This explains an apparent tension with Matthew 6:1, where Jesus warns against doing good works “to be seen of them.” The difference lies in motive. In chapter 6, the hypocrites want people to praise them. In chapter 5, disciples live in such a way that people praise God. The light is meant to point away from the believer and towards the Father. Whenever Christian service becomes a show for personal fame, the light has been turned into a spotlight on self, and it no longer fulfils its purpose.

5. Why Christians Must Let Their Light Shine

Why does Jesus insist that His followers must shine? Several reasons arise from Scripture.

First, the world is in darkness. The Bible describes humanity apart from God as walking in darkness (John 3:19; Ephesians 4:17–18). Darkness here means ignorance of God, moral confusion, sin, injustice and fear. Light is needed precisely because darkness is real. If the world were already full of light, the church's calling would be unnecessary.

Second, it is the nature of light to shine. A hidden light is a contradiction. Jesus' pictures of the city and the lamp make this point. A Christian who never lets his faith be seen in daily life is like a lamp under a bowl: present, but useless to others.

Third, God has chosen to work through His people. God's plan to bless the nations, first announced to Abraham (Genesis 12:3) and repeated through Isaiah, is carried forward through the church. The Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel (28:18–20) is the natural outworking of the call to be light. People often meet God first through the lives of His children before they read His Word.

Fourth, the credibility of the gospel depends on it. The message of Christ is either confirmed or contradicted by the lives of those who preach it. When believers are honest, kind and just, people are drawn to ask about the hope within them (1 Peter 2:12; 3:15). When believers are dishonest or selfish, the name of God is dishonoured among the unbelievers (Romans 2:24).

Fifth, there is a warning. The saying that comes just before our passage warns that salt which loses its saltiness is good for nothing (Matthew 5:13). A church that loses its distinctiveness loses its usefulness. The call to shine is therefore not optional decoration; it is essential to the church's very existence.

6. The Light in the History of the Church

Church history shows that when Christians took Jesus' words seriously, their light was seen even by their opponents. In the early centuries the church was a small and often persecuted minority in the Roman Empire. It had no political power, yet it grew steadily.

One important reason was the visible quality of Christian life. Believers cared for widows and orphans, rescued abandoned infants, visited prisoners and shared their food with the hungry.

During a terrible plague in the third century, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote that many Christians stayed in the city to nurse the sick, both believers and unbelievers, while many others fled. Some of these Christians caught the disease and died. A century later, the Emperor Julian, who wanted to restore the old pagan religion, complained that the Christians supported not only their own poor but the pagan poor as well, and that this was helping their faith to spread. His complaint is a striking testimony that the good works of believers were being seen, exactly as Jesus had said.

The same pattern can be seen in Africa. Missionaries and African Christians founded many of the first schools and hospitals in Nigeria, and countless leaders in public life received their education in mission institutions. Wherever Christians have combined faithful preaching with honest living and practical love, the gospel has gained a hearing. History therefore confirms the promise of Matthew 5:16: when people see genuine good works, many are led to glorify the Father in heaven.

7. Is the Church Shining Today? What Has Gone Wrong?

The command “Let your light shine” assumes that the light can be hidden. Jesus would not have needed to give the command if there were no danger of disciples covering their lamps. It is therefore right to ask honestly whether the church today is shining as it should.

There is much to thank God for. Throughout history, and in Nigeria today, Christians have built schools, hospitals and orphanages, cared for widows and the poor, stood for truth and suffered faithfully for Christ. Many believers quietly live lives of integrity in their homes and workplaces. The light has not gone out.

Yet there is also a painful contradiction. Nigeria is one of the most religious nations in the world. Churches are full, crusades draw huge crowds and Christian programmes fill the airwaves. At the same time, the nation continues to struggle with corruption, injustice,

violence, poverty and a lack of trust in public life, and it consistently ranks low on international measures of transparency. If so many people are “light,” why is there still so much darkness? Several problems can be identified.

The light has been hidden under the bushel of a Sunday-only faith. For many, Christianity is limited to the church building and the worship service. On Monday, the same people may give or take bribes, inflate contracts, cheat in examinations or treat workers unjustly. Faith that is not carried into the office, the market and the home is a light placed under a bowl.

The light has been dimmed by materialism. Some preaching has turned the gospel into a means of personal enrichment, measuring God’s blessing mainly by cars, houses and money. When success is defined in material terms, believers are tempted to pursue wealth by any means. The world then sees in the church the same greed it sees everywhere else, and it has no reason to glorify the Father.

The light has been turned into a spotlight on self. Sometimes good works are done for publicity, titles and recognition rather than for the glory of God. Jesus’ warning in Matthew 6:1–4 applies directly. When leaders seek fame, build personal empires or live in luxury while their members suffer, the light points to men rather than to the Father.

The light has been divided. A city on a hill is visible because its lights shine together. Divisions along lines of denomination, tribe, class and personal ambition weaken the church’s witness. Jesus prayed that His followers would be one “that the world may believe” (John 17:21).

The light has been hidden out of fear or comfort. Some believers keep silent about injustice because speaking out is costly. Others withdraw from public life, politics and civil service, regarding them as “dirty,” and so leave these areas without the influence of godly people. Like the temptation facing Matthew’s first readers, the temptation today is to retreat rather than to shine.

The light has been weakened by shallow discipleship. Many people come to church, but fewer are taught to obey all that Christ commanded (Matthew 28:20). Without

solid teaching, prayer and accountability, believers lack the inner strength to live differently from the world. A lamp without oil cannot keep burning.

The light has been mixed with darkness. Some believers attend church on Sunday but still consult diviners, use charms or seek help from occult sources when they face difficulty. Others mix the gospel with superstition and fear. Paul asks, “What communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14). A lamp that is mixed with darkness gives an uncertain light, and the world cannot tell the difference between the church and the culture around it.

8. How the Contemporary Church Can Let Its Light Shine

If these are the problems, the answer is not merely to organise more programmes. It is to return to the meaning of Jesus’ words. Several practical steps follow.

Return to the source. Since believers only reflect the light of Christ, the first step is renewed closeness to Him through repentance, prayer and the Word. Revival of character must come before revival of activity.

Shine in daily life. Christians must show integrity where they work: honest civil servants, fair employers, diligent workers, truthful traders, and students who refuse to cheat. These ordinary acts of faithfulness are among the brightest forms of light in a society where dishonesty is common.

Shine in the home. Faithful marriages, loving care for children and respect for parents and the elderly are powerful witnesses in a time of family breakdown.

Shine through compassion and justice. The church should care for the poor, the sick, widows, orphans and victims of violence and displacement, and it should speak out for justice with courage and humility. Such works make the love of God visible.

Shine with humility. Leaders and members alike must examine their motives, so that all praise goes to the Father. Accountability in church finances and leadership will restore the credibility that has been lost.

Shine together. Churches can cooperate across denominational and ethnic lines in evangelism, relief and moral advocacy. A united church is like a city on a hill that cannot

be hidden.

Shine through clear witness to Christ. Good works open the door, but they must be accompanied by the word of the gospel. Believers should be ready to explain why they live as they do and to point people to Jesus Christ, the true Light. Good works without the gospel can be mistaken for mere kindness, while the gospel without good works sounds empty. The two belong together.

Shine in public life and in new spaces. Christians should be encouraged to serve in government, business, education, the media and the digital world with godly values. The internet and social media are today's hilltops, where the words and conduct of believers are seen by many.

9. Conclusion

When Jesus first said, "You are the light of the world," He spoke to a small, humble and often threatened group of Galilean disciples. He gave them an identity rooted in Israel's calling to be a light to the nations, and He told them not to hide that light but to live openly in good works so that others would glorify God. Matthew's first readers, facing pressure and persecution, needed the same reminder: the people of God must not retreat into hiding.

The contemporary church faces a similar challenge in a different form. Its light is threatened not only by persecution but also by compromise, materialism, self-promotion, division and a faith confined to Sunday. The world remains in darkness, and the church cannot fulfil its calling while its lamp is under a bowl. Jesus' command still stands: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." When believers return to Christ, the true Light, and live out His teaching in every area of life, the church will once again be a city on a hill that cannot be hidden.

References

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. London: SCM, 1959.
- Carson, D. A. *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5–7*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978.
- Eusebius. *The Church History*. Book 7, chapter 22 (the letter of Dionysius of Alexandria on the plague).
- France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Keener, Craig S. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Stott, John R. W. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978.
- Wright, N. T. *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1–15*. London: SPCK, 2002.
- The Holy Bible, King James Version.