

Shedding a Little Light

Matthew 5:1-16

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Karl Marx tried to change the world by uniting the working class into a political force that could overthrow the ruling class and redistribute the resources of a nation more equitably.

Harriet Tubman tried to change the world by helping African Americans escape slavery through the underground railroad. Tubman's courageous work aimed at making the world a better place through the emancipation of all people on earth.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton tried to change the world by organizing women in this country to demand the right to vote. She believed that once women were given political power, they would make the world more compassionate and just.

John D. Rockefeller tried to change the world through philanthropy. He believed that how one made one's money was not a matter for moral concern, but how one spent one's money was of critical importance. He thought he would improve the culture of all people through the funding of libraries, colleges, museums and music halls.

Adolph Hitler tried to change the world through genocide. He preached a philosophy of hate toward not only the Jewish people but toward homosexuals, the Roma people often known as gypsies, folks with disabilities and people with genetic features he labeled as inferior to the traits of the Nordic race.

Hugh Hefner tried to change the world by espousing a new sexual ethic through his Playboy philosophy of life. He believed that a more pleasure-centered society would be a better society.

Martin Luther King tried to change the world by securing civil rights for all the citizens of this country. He believed that as long as one person was the victim of injustice, the world could not be free, nor could it be the place God created it to be.

George Herbert Walker Bush believed he could change the world by encouraging individual acts of kindness and compassion. Rather than focus on sweeping social reforms, he sought to improve American society by establishing a "thousand points of light" throughout the country.

Michael Jackson, while preparing for the concert that was not to be, said he hoped to change the world through music which called people to love one another.

Marianne Wright Edelman continues to try to change the world through securing better education and health care for children. Ms Edelman believes that if we do a better job of taking care of our children, the next generation will do a better job of taking care of this world.

Bill Clinton is convinced that he can change the world by gathering the earth's richest and most powerful people and guiding them to invest in global programs that will foster prosperity and progress in areas of deprivation and need.

Jesus believed the world would be changed when individuals, converted through the new birth of the Holy Spirit, would shine the light of God's love into the relationships of their lives.

In Matthew 5:16, Jesus told his newly converted disciples to shine their light before all people so that they might see their light and give glory to God in Heaven.

How do we shed a little light in the world in which we live? Jesus describes the illuminating behavior he wants us to exemplify in what is usually referred to as the Beatitudes. Each statement calls us to act in ways totally opposite to the ways of the world. Each statement calls us to a radical kind of behavior that is impossible without the power of the spirit. Each statement calls us to shed a little light where we live so that God can redeem the world.

The first beatitude is "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." Poor in spirit refers to the humble, the folks who are more concerned about the needs of others than their own egos. I read recently of an incident that occurred between a mother named Adrienne and her three year old daughter, Bianca. Bianca had fallen into some fairly normal childish behavior when she didn't get her way. No matter where she was, when denied something she wanted, she would drop to the floor, kick her feet and scream. This behavior greatly embarrassed Adrienne because the people who witnessed this behavior acted like something was wrong with Adrienne for not controlling her petulant child.

The stares of the strangers made Adrienne feel so self-conscious and embarrassed, she would yield to her child's tantrums and give her what she demanded. Of course her response just reinforced the Bianca's behavior. Finally Adrienne, who is a devout Christian, realized that her reaction to her child was more about her own ego than her child's well being. A few days after this discovery, mother and child were in a Target near their home when Bianca asked for something that her mother denied. Immediately Bianca dropped to the floor and began to scream and kick and roll around on the floor. The normal onlookers gave their condemning stares at Adrienne, but this time she did not give into Bianca. Although she had to fight off the dictates of her ego, Adrienne dropped to the ground and began to scream, kick and roll around on the floor. An even larger crowd of disapproving strangers quickly assembled, at which point Adrienne's ego begged her to stop making a spectacle of herself. Adrienne decided, however, that her daughter's well being was more important than her own public image and so she continued. Then something new happened. Bianca quit screaming, stood up, walked to her mother's side and said, "I'll quit if you will." A little light was shed in Target that day as Adrienne set aside her ego to help her child.

Next, Christ said, "Blessed are those that mourn, for they will be comforted." My son Micah called this week to ask for prayer for a close friend of his named Katy. He said that Katy's brother was found dead in Afghanistan this week. She has four other brothers, all of whom are either in Iraq or Afghanistan serving in the military or working for private contractors. He said the family is mourning the death of the one son and living in high anxiety over the safety of the other brothers. Micah expressed his deep regret for their loss and promised to get us to pray for Katy and her family. By being willing to mourn a tragic situation, Micah shed a little light on a friend.

Last week, five teenagers were shot, two fatally, in a drive-by shooting in Washington D.C. One of the children who died was a middle-school student. On Wednesday, Jerry Buckner shared in very moving fashion his grief over this incident. As he mourned, he called the rest of us to feel the sorrow and a little light was shed in our Bible study.

The third beatitude is "blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." Meekness is the opposite of intimidation. Jesus is lifting up behavior that refuses to use force or the threat of force to get its own way. Instead, he is teaching us to rely on God's power as it works through love to right the wrongs of our lives.

I recently read an account from a pastor in Philadelphia who helped a young boy in his congregation who was beaten by someone he did not know. The kid was simply walking through an unfamiliar neighborhood when he was waylaid. The victim's friends wanted to gang up, go into the neighborhood and choose someone to take revenge upon. The boy, who had recently been baptized by the pastor, had another idea. Instead, with the pastor's help, he put a poster up on the corner where he had been beaten expressing forgiveness to the unknown perpetrator and assuring the bully that he would be in his prayers. It was an act of meekness that spread a little light in Philadelphia.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" is the next teaching from Jesus. Shane Claiborne writes that his favorite fast food restaurant was Taco Bell. Then one of his neighbors, who had picked tomatoes for the Yum Corporation, the group that owns Taco Bell, told him of the horrible conditions and inadequate pay given to pickers by that company. Claiborne was so disturbed by what he learned that he refused to eat at Taco Bell anymore. He writes that he wished the information would have condemned Checkers because he didn't like their food anyway.

Swearing off Taco Bell, however, didn't seem to be the full response that Christ wanted Shane to make, so he got involved with a group of tomato pickers who walked to the Yum corporations headquarters and spread their sweat and blood stained work clothes all over the campus of the gleaming building. The simple act drew the attention of the CEO of Taco Bell who, upon further research determined they were involved in a great injustice and not only changed Taco Bell's policies but influenced other corporations to do the same. A little light broke out at corporate headquarters.

Beatitude number five is "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." From time to time, people tell me, "I don't know how you can get along with everybody. So and so drives me crazy and I can't stand Mr. Y and Miss Z is so hateful, how can you have anything to do with those people?"

First off, I don't get along with everybody, however, I know what the person means. If I have some exceptional ability to get along with most people, even have compassion for most people, it is because I know that everybody has a story. Unlike you, I hear a major portion of people's stories at one time or another.

Most of us only think about our stories. We know that our mother is sick and needs a lot of attention and that our brother bullies us and that we're in over our heads with our credit cards and our kid is having trouble in school and our boss is over demanding and our spouse seems to be angry all the time. What we don't seem to know is that everybody else has a story too. Just like we want folks to understand our outbursts and failures in light of what we are up against, others want understanding too. When people lose their tempers, go on a drinking binges, express racist thoughts, puff up with self-righteousness, drop the ball on some obligation or whatever else it is people do, it is because of their story. I'm not saying their behavior is justified, I'm saying it is affected by their story.

Having mercy on others is simply being aware that they have a story, just like we do and responding to their sins, eccentricities and sometimes stupidity with consideration rather than condemnation. When we do that, we shed a little light.

The next beatitude is "blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Pure in heart means to do good without any hidden motives. We are to serve God because we love God not because we are trying to manipulate God's grace to get something we want. We are to help others out of a pure desire to assist, not out of a secret desire for recognition or pay.

I've learned to hang up the phone when someone calls the church and says, "Pastor, I'm Joe Smoh and I represent a corporation that just wants to help your church serve the Lord." Before that conversation ends, I guarantee you the person who "just wants to help churches serve the Lord" will be trying to sell me something or get me to give him your addresses or will want to make a "free" presentation to our congregation. Do you ever get the feeling that everyone is working on an angle? That's the opposite of being pure in heart and it throws the world into darkness. Doing good with a pure heart floods the world with light.

Next, the Lord teaches us "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." In the documentary "The Big One," the film maker enters the office of Phillip Knight, then CEO of Nike shoes, with two airline tickets to Indonesia. The film maker invites Knight to travel with him to Indonesia to see the conditions in which children earn a \$1.50 a day to make Nike shoes that sell for over \$100 in the U.S. The film maker's purpose is to bring a peaceful resolution to the growing hostility between workers and management in the Indonesian factory. Believing that CEO Knight is basically a decent guy, the film maker trusts that once he sees the plight of his workers, he will be moved to make the necessary changes and forestall the kind of violence that sometimes breaks out in climates of injustice. Much to his disappointment, however, Knight repeatedly laughs the invitation off and then states that he cannot do his job if he becomes personally involved with the process of making shoes.

The film maker was attempting to be a peacemaker, a person who works to resolve differences, reconcile hostile parties and bring people to full and complete forgiveness. He was trying to shine a little light but found that some people prefer the darkness.

The last beatitudes can be combined into one large statement. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people persecute or mistreat you because you are trying to do the right thing." Jesus loved us too much to lie to us. He never said, "follow my teaching and the world will welcome you, your fame will spread throughout the land, you will be rewarded with promotions and accolades. No, in all these beatitudes, he promises that God will notice our behavior and reward it with God's blessings. We will be given the Kingdom of Heaven, we will be filled with righteousness, we will inherit the earth, we will be known as children of God, we will see God.

"But in this world," Jesus continues, "many people will respond negatively to your efforts to make peace, show mercy, walk with meekness, thirst for justice and demonstrate purity of heart."

I've noticed, through raising five children, that when I go into their rooms in the early morning before school and flip on their overhead lights as I say, "wake up it's time for school," they react negatively. You know why? They see the light and it interrupts their sleep.

Jesus said that when we put his teachings into practice, we will often experience the same kind of negative reactivity. When that happens, Jesus said, rejoice because their irritation at being called awake will confirm one glorious truth: Like the prophets and the saints before you, your light is shining.